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TEXAS CHARLIE'S WILD RIDE.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.



HOLDING THE LARIAT AS A REINS TO DRIVE HIS NOVEL TEAM, CHARLIE STARTED OFF THE HORSES
AT A GALLOP ALONG THE TRAIL INTO THE INTERIOR,

Texas Charlie's Wild Ride; OR, THE BOY RANGER.

A Narrative of Thrilling Incidents in the Life
of Captain Charles Bigelow, of the Lone
Star State, whose Career as a Young
Guide, Indian-Fighter and Ranger
has been full of Romantic Ad-
venture and Deadly Peril.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "ADVENTURES OF BUFFALO BILL,"
"WILD BILL," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. THE CHASE.

"WAAL, Charlie, ther fandango hev ended, fer I kin dance no longer ter any tune; but you kin jist skip on an' leave ther old man fer ther Injuns ter scalp an' ther coyotes ter chaw."

"I do not think it is kind of you, Old Hickory, to think I would leave you now, for I would rather die right here with you than live with the feeling that I had deserted you when you was dying."

"Leetle pard, it hain't yer way, I knows; but then I hev had my day, and you is jist startin' in on ther trail o' life."

"I hev gone it fine, too; hed my ups and downs, and tuk things easy in ther sixty-five year I hev hooped it through ther canyons o' life. But ther end are come, as that arrer struck vitals, and I knows when I hev got my death-wound, though I never had one afore."

"We is well ahead o' ther Injuns, and ridin' two horses, fer yer kin rest one and then t'other, you kin keep out o' tha' way."

"Hold right dead sou'-east and you'll strike white-folks' kentry afore two days, and tell 'em how Old Hickory hed ter cave at last to a Injun arrer."

"I hain't got more'n a hour or so ter live, an' yer kin leave me at yonder timber, an' when ther reds comes up I'll jist keep one revolver ter open on 'em with, which will give me comp'ny, ef it do be Injuns, to ther happy hunting-grounds."

"Hickory, I'll not leave you; but, as I see that you are suffering, we will halt in the timber yonder, and I can stand the Injuns off, or take the consequences if I cannot."

"Boy, you has ther sand o' your daddy, who was full o' grit, as I knows, fer I has fought with him in Mexico and on these pararers."

"But I don't want yer father's son ter lose his scalp from ther very regard I hed fer yer father."

"I won't go, Hickory, and that settles it."

"Yer is as contrary as a woman."

"I will stand by you, old man, come what may."

"Waal, we'll hunt ther timber, fer I are git-tin' too weak to hold on much longer."

The speakers were an old weather-tanned prairie-man and a boy of fifteen.

They were both dressed in buckskin, well mounted, well armed, and were flying for their lives, for far in their rear came a party of red horsemen in hot pursuit.

The elderly man was a thorough type of the Texas borderman, and he was known along the outskirts of civilization as Old Hickory.

But now his face was livid from suffering, and the seal of death was soon to be set upon his lips.

His companion was, as I have said, a boy of fifteen.

A handsome, fearless-faced, sun-burned youth, who is a real hero to-day, for he has carved out for himself a name that is well known in the Lone Star State.*

He was dressed in buckskin leggings, a hunting-shirt of the same, wore a sombrero looped up on one side with a silver star, and had a belt about his waist containing a pair of revolvers and a bowie-knife, while at his back was hung a rifle.

His form was well-knit and agile, and he sat his horse with that free and easy air natural to Southern youths, who have learned to ride from childhood and not been taught by a stiff professional rider.

The horses of the two riders showed that they had been driven hard.

The clump of timber ahead was a small grove of half an acre in size, and showing the remnants of many a camp fire, for a spring was there and plenty of wood, so that both Indian and pale-face had found it a convenient halting-place.

Soon the timber was reached, and, as the horses came to a halt, Old Hickory dropped heavily to the ground.

"Couldn't hold on longer, Charlie, boy."

"I hev been like a cat an' hed nine lives, but I guess ther ninth one are about gone now," said the old man.

Charlie had already sprung to the ground and was making his comrade as comfortable as possible.

As soon as he got him placed in as easy a position as was possible, he seized a stout pole, which had once served as a wagon pole, and moved logs into position about them so as to form a little fort.

There was a natural hollow in the ground just there, and this had already been added to by dirt, thrown up as a fortification, and this, with the logs rolled to the top, made quite a secure retreat some twelve feet square.

The horses were then watered at the spring, the canteens filled, and the animals were led into the inclosure by Charlie and told to lie down on one side, which they did with prompt obedience.

Then they were quickly hopped to prevent

* Charles Bigelow—Texas Charlie—was born in Houston, Texas, in 1845. He has been a scout, guide, ranger, cowboy, ranchero and Indian interpreter, and is well known in Texan history, winning a name as a daring border-boy long before he left his teens. Texas Charlie's father was the third mayor of Houston, and was also a noted soldier in the Mexican war.—THE AUTHOR.

their getting up, and Charlie began to fill in the crevices of the little fort with pieces of wood and dirt, Old Hickory watching him the while with eyes that were rapidly growing dim.

"You is fixing to stay, Charlie, it do look like," he said, in a low tone.

"Yes, old man, the Injuns are most here, and I'll be ready for them when they come."

"You has done well, boy, and you is goin' ter do better.

"I is only sorry on your account I hes got ter leave ther trail o' life, for yer is a long way from home, an' when yer good folks trusted yer on a scout with Old Hickory, they didn't think I was goin' to desart yer, did they?"

"Oh, Hickory, they will feel so bad if I have to go home without you," and Charlie choked up at the thought of losing the old man with whom he had trod many a long trail.

"I has l'arnt yer all I c'u'd, boy.

"I has taughted yer how ter trail Injun or Greaser, an' hes let yer know ther cussedness o' both.

"Yer hes kilt yer fust Injun under my tutor-in', an' that won't be yer last.

"I hes got ter go, but yer won't fergit me, boy, I knows, and when yer comes by this way ag'in in years ter come, jist kinder look down on ther spot whar Old Hickory are sleepin', an' sing ther pretty songs yer have singed fer me, fer they won't disturb me."

"Hickory, don't talk so, or you'll make me want to die too.

"Ah! the red-skins have halted just out upon the prairie and think they have us in a trap."

"Waal, thar'll be wailin' in thar camp ef they crowds yer, boy.

"I wish I c'u'd help yer sling lead a bit, but I bain't able ter git up, an' I gits weaker on common fast, fer this leetle red spring comes a-bubblin' out o' my side pretty peart— Ah! boy, look out fer 'em, fer that yell means they is comin' with a rush upon yer," and as Old Hickory spoke the wildest yells resounded from the half-score of red-skins who came charging down upon the brave boy, who was alone the defender of the little fort.

CHAPTER II.

CHARLIE'S FIGHT FOR LIFE.

THE red-skins had pressed on hard after Old Hickory and his boy comrade, for they knew who they were and were determined to capture them alive if possible.

A runner had come into the Comanche camp with the news that their dreaded foe, Old Hickory the scout, had invaded their country, and had with him a young boy brave who on several occasions before had accompanied the old Indian-fighter.

They had been met, the runner reported, by four warriors, and he alone had escaped to tell the story.

The Comanche chief picked fifteen of his best warriors, and with their best arms and ponies they started upon the trail of the daring pale-faces.

They found them rather sooner than they desired, for two of their warriors dropped dead from their saddles before they suspected the

presence in that immediate vicinity of Old Hickory and Charlie.

Then began a running fight, the Indians pressing on hard, and the whites standing at bay when they wished to rest their ponies.

Several Indians fell from time to time when pressing their foes too hard, and at last their number dwindled down to ten, while the damage they had done was to severely wound Old Hickory in two places, slightly wound Charlie in the leg, and send an arrow into the neck of the boy's horse.

Thus it was that the flight and running fight continued to the timber where the little fort was so cleverly constructed by Charlie.

Seeing that the Indians were charging, the daring boy did not flinch, but stood his ground nobly.

He was armed with a double-barreled rifle and shot-gun combined, while Old Hickory had his rifle, an old-fashioned piece, and both had their pistols.

His weapons, and those of the scout Charlie placed at hand ready for use, and when the redskins came charging into the timber from different directions, he watched his chance and raised the rifle of Old Hickory.

It was a most critical moment, and one which a boy man would have shrunk from, for the Indians came charging down upon the little fort from three different directions, yelling like mad, and causing their ponies to spring from side to side to destroy the aim of their foes, for they little knew that the boy was the only defender.

Old Hickory's dying eyes turned anxiously upon the boy.

He had seen him tried before, but would he now, in such a forlorn hope, not lose his nerve he wondered.

For himself he did not care, for he was too near the shadow-land to fear; but for the brave boy he felt a pang of deepest sympathy.

He had been placed under his care, and sad, indeed, would it be if he never returned to the home where those that loved him dwelt and anxiously looked for his coming?

He saw Charlie raise the rifle and take a cool aim.

Then the piece flashed forth its deadly bullet, and he asked eagerly:

"Did yer miss, boy pard?"

"Oh, no! I can't afford a miss now," was the cool response, as Charlie seized his own gun.

"Yer'll do to bet on ef yer bain't got a trump in yer hand," said Old Hickory, and with his last word the rifle-barrel cracked, and Charlie cried:

"I downed him, too."

"Bully fer you, Charlie boy; now let 'em hev ther slugs," cried Old Hickory, with something like his old fervor.

The shot gun barrel was loaded with buckshot, and Charlie had thrown half a dozen bullets in on top to make greater havoc.

His eye scanned the different warriors at a glance, and seeing two together he aimed at them so as to scatter the lead into both, as well as their ponies.

Charlie's finger touched the trigger when they

were side by side, and the load of buckshot and bullets went tearing into the flesh of the two warriors and their ponies with fatal effect."

"Three at a shot, Old Hickory," shouted Charlie, as the two warriors and one pony went down under the merciless hail of lead.

But Old Hickory made no reply, while Charlie, too busy now to turn toward him, seized a revolver in each hand and began to rattle forth a hot fire upon the Indians, who were now becoming demoralized.

"Hurrah, Hickory! they are running," cried Charlie, as he saw the red-skins hastily hilt cover and begin to retreat.

But Old Hickory made no reply, and turning quickly toward him, the boy saw that he was dead.

CHAPTER III.

AN INDIAN TAKES A TUMBLE.

FOR an instant Charlie was too much overcome by the death of his old pard to utter a word, but stood in silence gazing down upon him.

He had hoped all along that Hickory's wound was not as bad as the old scout feared, and that he would get over it; but the sudden death of the man, an instant after he had spoken to him, almost overwhelmed the brave boy, and for a minute his eyes were too dimmed with tears to see the upturned face.

He had just fought a good fight, and beaten back a foe from whom he had not flinched in the moment of direst peril.

Two warriors lay dead before him, and another brave and two ponies had been severely wounded, the latter struggling about in agony, while the former had crawled to a friendly tree for refuge.

Brushing the tears from his eyes, Charlie glanced down tenderly upon the body of his dear friend.

Then he started, for he saw what had so suddenly taken off the old scout, as an arrow was sticking in his neck.

From whence had that arrow come? The boy's life upon the plains, and especially under so apt a tutor as Old Hickory, caused him to take note of things which would have escaped an ordinary eye.

By this he discovered that the arrow had not come straight in its flight from a position level with the ground, as it could never have gotten through the breastwork of logs and dirt.

Had it been fired upward and then come down into the fort, the force would never have been great enough for it to bury itself in the neck of the scout as it had.

The position of the arrow, too, showed that its flight from the bow to the neck of Old Hickory had been on a straight line.

From whence, then, had it come, but from an elevation that enabled the sender to look down into the fort.

This discovery was made by Charlie much quicker than it has taken me to tell about it, and he quickly dropped for shelter out of sight, knowing that the same deadly shot would soon send an arrow searching for his life.

With a stick he forced a hole through the top of the breastwork of earth, and began to recon-

noiter the tree-tops in the direction from whence the shaft had come.

The main body of Comanches had fallen back and out of range of the deadly rifles, and were consulting excitedly together, and counting them, Charlie saw that, besides the two dead Indians and the wounded one hugging the tree, one other was missing.

"He's the one up a tree," muttered Charlie, and he continued his search for him.

At last he descried the object of his search perched upon a limb some fifty feet from the ground.

The nature of the tree was such, with its broken branches, that he had been enabled to climb up there during the excitement without attracting attention.

Not knowing that the boy was looking up theories as to from whence had come the shot that had killed the old scout, he did not take particular care to hide himself.

He was so elated at having slain Old Hickory, and so anxious to kill Charlie, so as to get all the credit, that he became reckless.

He doubtless thought that, could he send an arrow into the heart of the boy, he could clamber down the tree, rush alone upon the little fort, secure the two scalps, and thus immortalize himself with his tribe.

He had not the remotest idea that Charlie knew from whence the arrow had come, and he would not give his war-cry of triumph, and thus tell his comrades what he had done and perhaps cut himself out of his expected honor.

Charlie watched him closely, and at the same time was enlarging the hole so that he could put the muzzle of Old Hickory's rifle through and get a shot at him.

He did not, however, neglect to keep an eye upon the group of Indians on the prairie, and when raising his head to look at them, he protected it with a piece of wood from a shot from the wounded red-skin and the one in the tree.

The former shot at him, and an arrow buried itself in the wood; but the latter was too smart to betray himself by any such an act.

The shot of the wounded Indian seemed to attract to him, Charlie then saw, the attention of the one in the tree, and, to his surprise, he saw the highly-perched red-skin turn his bow as though to shoot his comrade.

Could he intend to kill his companion in arms?

Could he be a red-skin from some hostile tribe to the wounded Comanche?

So Charlie wondered, and then gazing again out upon the prairie, he counted the ponies and their riders and saw that the red-skin in the tree must be one of the band.

Still he saw that he was evidently hostile to the wounded Indian.

Perhaps he was his foe, and intended to take this opportunity of getting rid of him, and thus put out of the way a dangerous rival for the hand of some red-skinned beauty.

While Charlie was wondering, an arrow went on its fatal flight, and he saw the red-skin whom he had wounded fall back from his shelter behind the tree.

"He has killed his comrade, that is certain; and if poor Old Hickory's dead lips could only

speak, he could tell me why—but alas! he is dead.

"Well, the red-skin in the tree has done me a favor in killing his comrade, and now I must return it."

Charlie smiled grimly as he spoke, at the manner in which he intended to return the favor, and shoved the muzzle of Old Hickory's rifle through the hole to do so.

It was a long-range shot, but Charlie had a good rest for the weapon, and after a deliberate aim he touched the trigger.

The Indian feeling that he was not visible, not having his retreat discovered by the boy, was standing on a limb at his dizzy height watching for a chance to shoot Charlie, when the bullet hit him squarely in the side.

With a yell of mortal terror and agony commingled, he sprung off from the limb and shot downward like an arrow, turning over and over in his flight, while his bow and arrows fell about him.

"That Injun has taken a tumble," coolly said Charlie as he drew his rifle back, and then turning his eyes upon the dead body of Old Hickory, he continued sadly:

"And I have avenged you, dear old man."

CHAPTER IV.

THE FLIGHT RENEWED.

The Indians heard the wild cry of their comrade, saw the form come whirling downward through the air, and then to their ears came the dull thud as the mass of humanity struck the ground.

They did not yet know that Old Hickory was dead, and they registered another determination for revenge against him.

It was yet an hour to sunset, and when the darkness came they would act.

As silent as specters they would glide through the timber, and then, when all had gained a certain position, they would rush upon the little fort—and the end must come.

Some of them must die they knew, but with three to one, as they believed they were, they must in a hand-to-hand fight conquer even Old Hickory and his brave boy pard.

Had the old scout been alive, he might have decided to remain in the fort and take the consequences; but with Charlie it was different.

He knew that his horses had had a good rest, and besides they had had water and a little grass, which had not been the case with the Indian ponies, for the prairie where they were had been burned over, and the spring was within ten feet of the little fort.

In the timber about the spring there was plenty of juicy grass, and here the two horses had fed until taken into the little inclosure, while they had had a good drink at the spring.

Charlie's experience with the Indians told him that they would await until dark to attack, feeling assured that he would make no effort to leave a shelter which he had sought and made so strong.

So he determined to fool them.

His first work in this direction was to uncoil the lariat from about the shoulder of Old Hickory, while he said, quietly:

"They shall not have your scalp, old man."

Then he drew the body over to the horse Old Hickory had ridden, and placing it upon the animal's back, fastened it securely there.

His next move was to watch his chance, spring over the fort, and cut with his knife a large armful of grass, which he gave to the horses.

If the Indians saw him they did not heed his act, feeling sure of their game when night came on.

The broad sombrero of Old Hickory was then made to serve the place of a bucket, and the horses each had a hatful of water, and certainly seemed refreshed.

Then the hopples about their feet were removed, so that they would not be cramped by them when needed, and Charlie devoted his time next to looking after his weapons.

"I would like to get the scalp of that red who killed poor Old Hickory," he muttered, and he looked wistfully toward the spot where the red-skin lay.

"I will try it, anyhow."

So with this bold determination he sprung over the wall of his little fort, and ran like a deer to where the Indian lay, carrying his rifle in his hand.

He reached the body of the red-skin before the Indians saw his act, for they did not anticipate that he would leave the fort.

Instantly they uttered wild yells and started toward him, sending a shower of arrows as they advanced.

Charlie had never scalped an Indian in his life, but he had seen the work scientifically done by Old Hickory, and he intended to pattern after the actions of the scout as nearly as possible.

He had no time for practice, and in fact but one subject to practice upon, and he quickly seized the scalp-lock, gave his knife a sudden turn about it, shuddering as he did so, and wrenches the gory trophy from its resting-place.

"I hated to do it, but he killed poor Old Hickory," he said aloud, as he turned and leveled his rifle at his foes, who were advancing rapidly. Seeing his act, and knowing the deadly weapon well, the red-skins threw themselves upon their faces, and without firing the boy bounded away like a deer for his retreat.

With yells of rage the Indians followed, firing as they came on; but Charlie sprung over the works unhurt, and seizing Old Hickory's sombrero, placed it upon his head and leveled his rifle.

He knew that the Comanches were not aware of Old Hickory's death, and his quick discharge of the rifle, with the scout's hat showing above the breastwork, would give them an idea that he was ready for their foes.

The shot was a little too hurried, and did not do deadly work; but the bullet struck a Comanche in the hand, and this proved hint enough to cause him and the others to beat a hasty retreat, especially as they were not mounted.

Charlie dropped the rifle and seizing his own weapon sent a shower of bullets from the shotgun barrel flying after them, which accelerated their movements greatly.

"Now, ponies, we have got to get up and

dust," cried Charlie quickly, as he hastily re-loaded his weapons, and then tore away one side of the little fort, so as to enable the horses to get out.

Aiding the horse that bore the body of the old scout, to rise, Charlie called to his own pony to get up, and mounting, dashed out of the fort.

He carried the rifle in his hand, ready for use, and at his back slung his own gun, while he led the horse bearing Old Hickory, the animal keeping up well by the side of its companion.

So enraged were the Comanches at seeing the scalp of their comrade taken by a boy from before their eyes, and so busy were they plotting what they would do when night came on, that Charlie had gotten thirty paces from the fort before they realized that he intended to escape.

Then with wild yells they rushed to their ponies and began the pursuit, for they then saw that Old Hickory, their greatly dreaded foe was dead.

Charlie urged his horses into a rapid gallop, and refreshed by their drink, the grass they had gotten and their lying down rest, they moved off at a willing pace that gave the boy high hopes.

The Indians, almost famished for water, as were their horses, stopped at the spring to quench their thirst; and found it almost a mud-hole, which would take a long time to get clear enough to drink.

But in spite of the muddy water the ponies shoved their noses down deep into it, and thus some precious time was gained by Charlie in his flight for life.

CHAPTER V.

THE ARREST AT THE GRAVE.

CHARLIE held his own so well against the pursuing Comanches, that when darkness settled upon the earth he had gained a long distance on them, and felt no dread of being captured.

He had begun a wild prairie life with a vengeance, and yet his bold nature was one to love the excitement of the danger, and he felt proud of the manner in which he had outwitted his foes, and thought of the stories he would have to relate upon his return home.

As soon as it grew very dark he changed his course to a right angle, and continued to do this for several hours, so as to throw the Indians wholly off his trail.

He also slackened the pace of his horses to a walk, for the animal bearing the body of Old Hickory began to feel distress at the dead weight upon him.

Toward midnight, confident that the Comanches could no longer follow his trail, after the chase he had led them, and that with their small force would not do so on the morrow, he began to look about for a camping-ground.

He found a snug spot in a clump of timber, and soon had his horses unsaddled, placing the body of the scout tenderly to one side.

He dared not build a fire, so ate his supper in darkness and silence, and then, utterly worn out, lay down on the same blanket with his

dead comrade, seeming to feel a comfort in being near the scout, though he was silent in death.

The sun was rising, and peering into his face when he awoke, and he sprung to his feet and glanced about him in a dazed kind of way, as though not at first able to recall all that had happened, and he called out:

"Come, old man, it is time to be on the go."

Then over him came the rush of thought that told him what had happened, and the tears came into his eyes as they fell upon the form that had shared his blanket with him.

The horses had had a good rest and plenty of water and grass, so that they no longer looked worn out, but ready for another day's travel.

"I must bury the poor old man," muttered Charlie, and after eating his breakfast from force of habit, rather than from enjoyment upon that morning, he sought a spot in which to dig a grave for Old Hickory.

A grassy knoll on the bank of a small creek was selected, and the knife of the brave boy was soon throwing out the dirt.

After getting it the requisite size and depth, he rolled the body in its blanket and gently placed it in the lonely resting-place, throwing in the earth upon it in a tender manner that showed deep feeling for the dead.

At last the mound was made, and the boy stood gazing sadly down upon it.

He was many long miles from home, and believed that no living human being was near him, unless it might be straggling Indians, or a hunter.

"Senor, you are my prisoner!"

The words broke most startlingly upon the ears of Charlie Bigelow, for they were spoken within a few steps of him.

His belt of arms he had taken off, to enable him to work the better, and the rifle and shotgun leant against a tree not far distant, yet too far for him to reach.

His only weapon was the knife which he held in his hand.

But, had he been armed, resistance would have been useless, for before him stood three men, all covering him with revolvers, and back in the timber were half a dozen more, mounted, and holding the reins of the animals that belonged to the trio who so suddenly confronted him.

They had come upon him unnoticed in his grief and hard work, and they were a villainous-looking set, whom the boy knew at once to be Mexicans.

As Mexicans, and in that locality, they could belong to but one band, and that was an outlaw band that had long been a terror upon the Texas border, and whom the Rangers hunted down without mercy, for mercy was not asked or given then upon the Rio Grande.

"Who are you?" asked Charlie, though he but too well knew how to answer his own question.

"We are Mexican soldiers," was the response.

"Mexican Marauders you mean," fearlessly responded Charlie, speaking in Spanish, which he spoke well.

"How dare you accuse us of being Marauders,

"boy?" angrily asked the man who appeared to be the leader.

"Mexican soldiers would not be upon Texan soil, while the Mexican Marauders are continually robbing and murdering Texans upon their own ground," came the bold answer.

"We are soldiers, and we have come here to arrest you."

"To arrest me? What have I done to you?"

"You killed our comrade and have just buried him there, and would soon have made your escape, had we not come up as we did."

"The man who lies there was my friend and comrade, and he was slain by Indians. I know nothing of your comrade," indignantly said Charlie.

"He lies in that grave and you put him there, for yonder stands his horse, and here are his rifle and belt of arms, which we recognize, so I shall arrest you as his murderer."

"Open the grave and see if it is not my friend as I say."

"There is no need of that young senor, for you must go with us and answer to the charge of murder."

Charlie was powerless to resist, and ten minutes after was riding away upon his own horse, a prisoner to the band of Mexicans.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEATH SENTENCE.

AFTER their capture of Charlie, the Mexicans rode rapidly back toward their own country, crossing the river in hot haste, and seeking a stronghold in the hills where they defied pursuit from all in authority.

Charlie saw that he was treated as an important prisoner, and wondered why it was that they had made the charge against him which they had.

To have opened the grave would have shown them that it was not a Mexican that lay in it, and this they had refused to do, while they claimed to recognize the horse and accoutrements of Old Hickory as those that had belonged to their dead comrade.

Arriving in sight of the stronghold in the hills, Charlie was securely blindfolded, and when the bandage was removed from his eyes, he saw that he was in a wild and picturesque camp in the hills.

About him were nearly half a hundred villainous-looking men, who were gambling in groups, smoking, sleeping or gazing at him.

There were tepees instead of cabins for them to dwell in, and upon a plain near by were hundreds of horses, cattle and sheep, evidently the results of many a daring raid upon Texas soil.

Charlie had long known of the Mexican Marauders and their doings, and heard how Don Keno their chief, was the most cruel man alive.

He did not now doubt but that he was in the Marauders' camp, and expected that he was to make the acquaintance of the cruel Don.

He was not mistaken, for soon he was led up to a tepee before which sat a man smoking a cigarrito, and at the same time leisurely sipping

a glass of wine, while on a rustic table near him stood a silver decanter.

The man was a Mexican, above the usual height of his race, and had a dark, interesting face, though one that was to be dreaded.

He was flashily dressed in the picturesque and rich costume of his country, and heavily armed with silver-mounted revolvers and a short sword that hung by a silver chain to his side.

His face was shaded by his broad sombrero, but Charlie saw his dark eyes fixed upon him with a look in which there was not an atom of mercy.

"This is the boy, Juan, which you say killed Pedro?" said the chief, as Charlie advanced before him.

"Yes, senor."

"You must have pursued him far to be gone so long."

"We did, senor; we found the trail of Pedro, and, as you bade us, pushed on hard after it, determined that the deserter and robber should not escape.

"He must have ridden into an ambush, set for him by this boy, for we found him dead and buried, and the prisoner standing by the grave."

"No one else near?"

"No, Don Keno."

"And the gold that Pedro, the deserter, carried off with him?"

"We could not find it, senor."

"Then the boy has hidden it?"

"Yes, chief."

"It will do him no good," and turning to Charlie and speaking in English, with only the slightest accent, the chief continued:

"So, young senor, you have killed one of my band, who, though a robber and a deserter, pursued by my men, was yet a Mexican, and you are a Texan."

Charlie saw two things at a glance.

The first was that the men who had captured him were those sent in pursuit of the deserter, and they were afraid to return without him.

The second was that, though the man was a deserter, he was a Mexican, and for a Texan to kill him, granted that his accusers told the truth, meant death to the murderer.

He well understood his danger, but said boldly:

"I did not kill the man, senor, as that man says."

"Why do you deny what can be proven?" sternly said the chief.

"I had just buried a man, I admit; but he was my friend, a scout, who had been killed by Indians."

"They came upon me unawares, and accused me of killing their comrade, and refused to open the grave, as I asked them to do, to see that it was not their companion."

"This is a subterfuge, Don Keno, to escape, for we saw him bury Pedro, and of course knew who it was in the grave."

"He said he recognized the horse of my comrade as that ridden by the man you refer to."

"Will you ask him to show the animal, senor, and you will know?"

"Certainly," said the chief quickly, and he added:

"Bring Pedro's horse here, Juan."

"Yes, senor," and the man departed to soon return leading a horse that was certainly not the one that had belonged to Old Hickory.

"That is the horse of Pedro, sir; now what have you to say?" and the chief turned to Charlie, who was certainly taken aback at having the horse produced.

"They found the horse, but not the man, and it helps them in their story about me," thought Charlie.

"I have only to say, senor, that I am not guilty of the charge against me," he said, calmly.

"Are you a Texan?"

"Yes."

"Are you a Ranger?"

"I am not, sir, but I hope to be."

"Do you know where Major Hall's Rangers encamp?"

"I do, sir."

"How many Rangers has he?"

"Fifteen are always kept in camp ready for use, and the remainder stay upon their ranches ready for call."

"Major Hall remains in camp, I believe, all the time?"

"The encampment is on his ranch, and his horse is very near."

"You know it well?"

"Yes, sir."

"I hate Major Sam Hall, for he had my brother shot some years ago, and I have sworn vengeance against him and his Rangers."

"Your brother was guilty of some crime or Sam Hall would never have had him shot, and the Rangers have also sworn vengeance against you and your outlaws," boldly said Charlie.

"You are a plucky fellow for your years," the chief remarked.

"Years are no sign of bravery," was the cool reply.

"Well, we will see how much you love life."

"I love it a great deal," was the frank response.

"You have murdered one of my men and you are thereby sentenced to death, for I now tell you that I shall have you shot at sunset."

Charlie turned very pale, and his lips quivered at this terrible doom confronting him, but he said in a low, distinct tone:

"You will find that if I am but a boy I am a Texan and can die like one."

CHAPTER VII

THE DON'S OFFER.

"You are a game one," and Don Keno looked admiringly at Charlie after his plucky words.

The boy made no reply; he could say nothing, for his heart was full, but he was nervously awaiting his fate with true courage.

He did not lose hope, and it seemed to him that Don Keno, vile as he was, merciless as he had shown himself, could not put him to death when he had not really harmed them.

But upon this matter the Mexican Marauder chief soon set his mind in the right channel of

thinking he had nothing to hope for from him, as he remarked quietly:

"You do not fear death, you say?"

"I do fear death, but I will meet it bravely."

"You are very young."

"Yes."

"Life is before you with all its pleasures, and if I mistake not you are ambitious?"

"I wish to make a man one of these days of whom my kindred will not be ashamed."

"Well, there is a way in which you can save your life."

"How do you mean, senor?"

"I mean that if you will do as I wish you to, I will not kill you."

"What do you wish me to do?"

"You have told me that you are acquainted with the camp of Major Sam Hall and his Rangers?"

"I am."

"And you can lead me there?"

"I could."

"And you will?"

"Alone?"

"No."

"With your band?"

"Yes."

"For what purpose?"

"For what purpose would you think the Mexican Marauders would wish to be led against the Texan camp?"

"To surprise and kill them."

"Exactly."

"And you expect me to lead you against my own people?" asked Charlie with surprise and indignation depicted upon his fearless face.

"Yes," was the smiling reply.

"I will not do it."

"Then I must force you to do so."

"You cannot force me to do so vile an act," hotly responded the boy.

"I will make you an offer."

"Well?"

"Lead me by a night march to the ranch of Major Sam Hall, and I will give you your freedom."

"No."

"Refuse, and I will kill you."

"I would rather die than do an act so mean."

"You refuse my offer then?"

"Certainly I do."

"Then you shall die."

Charlie merely tossed his long hair back defiantly, and made no reply.

"I will not have you shot to-night, but at sunrise you shall end your days, for I will give you until that time to decide whether it will be life or death for you."

"It will be death, if you spare me only on the terms you offer, senor," said Charlie sadly.

"Come, Juan, there is no longer need of talk with the obstinate boy, so take him to the lock-up."

"He knows my terms, and he'll die tomorrow unless he agrees to guide me to Hall's camp."

"Yes, senor," answered the man Juan to his angry chief, and he led Charlie up the canyon to where a cabin of heavy logs was built against the rocky wall.

A massive door was in one end, and it was fastened securely on the outside with a heavy chain and padlock.

Into this place Charlie was rudely shoved by Juan, his hands tied behind him, and the door closed upon him.

But a faint light penetrated the cabin, showing him a bearskin on the floor to serve as a bed, and not another article of any kind visible in the dreary prison.

Seating himself upon this, Charlie began to meditate drearily upon his unfortunate position, and it was no wonder that hope fled from his brave young heart.

But after awhile he regained his nerve, and began to look about him for some means of escape.

The glances he cast around him showed him how fruitless would be an attempt to get out of that cage, for such it really was.

The four walls were of logs, a foot in diameter, the ends cut so as to closely fit together, and overhead and underfoot were the same, the only opening being the door of heavy hewn timber, and the only light and air coming through the cracks here and there visible.

Charlie had seen the stout chain and padlock without that held the door, and he concluded that had he an ax even to work with, it would take him hours to cut a hole through those timbers large enough for him to crawl through.

"They do not keep a guard outside, and no wonder, for none is needed," he said despondingly, as hope again fled from him.

Peeping through a crack he saw the outlaws going hither and thither, and their rude laughter and jests reached his ears.

At length the shadows of night began to fall, and soon all was darkness in the prison excepting where here and there a ray of light from the camp-fires pierced a crevice.

"Well, this is dismal; but I expect I'll spend to-morrow night in closer and cooler quarters than this," muttered the poor boy, and he threw himself down upon the bearskin almost overcome with emotion, while he murmured:

"Oh, what will they say at home when they know I am never coming back?"

"Oh, how I wish I could let brave Major Hall and his Rangers know how they kill me! How well would I be avenged!"

And as though this thought was consoling, Charlie gradually sunk to sleep.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

CHARLIE certainly slept sound, notwithstanding his expecting to die on the morrow, for it took a grasp upon his shoulder to awaken him.

"Who is it, and where am I?" he asked, bewildered in the darkness and by his dreams.

"Sh!" said a voice cautiously.

"Is that you, Hickory?" he asked again forgetting that the old scout was dead.

But the name recalled the fact, and its subsequent happenings, and he put out his hand and felt a form near his own.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"A friend," was the low whispered response.

"I need a friend, that is certain, for I am in hard luck; but who are you?"

"Do not speak now, for I heard voices without."

"Let me see who they are."

The mysterious visitor left his side and was absent for what seemed to Charlie a very long while.

Then he heard again, in the same low, soft tone:

"They were some of the band coming in, and they have gone on to their quarters, so now you must go with me."

"But where?"

"You know the way to your home?"

"When I reach the Rio Grande, yes."

"But you do not know the way to the river?"

"The Marauders blindfolded me in bringing me here: but who are you?"

"I said I was your friend."

"And you intend to help me escape?" eagerly asked Charlie.

"Yes."

"But how can you?"

"I have the key, as you must know by my being in here."

"Your voice tells me that you are a woman."

"I am, unfortunately," was the reply in a bitter tone.

"You are a captive here to the Marauders?"

"No, I am—but never mind who, or what I am."

"I know your peril; I saw you to-day, though you did not see me, and I am determined that you shall not die, so I have come to save you."

"And you can?"

"Yes."

"Oh! I do thank you ever so much: but thanks are a poor return for saving a life."

"They are all I care for: but now throw this disguise over you and come with me."

"It is a woman's dress," said Charlie, taking the garment handed to him.

"Yes, and here is a vail: now come."

Charlie got into the dress with more haste than grace, and his mysterious midnight visitor fastened the heavy vail about him so that few would have believed him other than a young girl.

Then she led him to the door, they passed out, and his feminine rescuer and guide turned and locked it securely.

Keeping close in the shadow of the side of the canyon the two passed in the rear of the tepees before several of which were flickering camp-fires, and were soon free of the camp.

Then down a rugged and steep pathway, she led the way until they reached the plain upon which were feeding the horses and cattle before referred to.

A clear call from the woman, thrice repeated, brought a horse trotting to her side, and catching him she said in the same gentle tones that seemed natural to her:

"Well, my good Hidalgo we part to-night, for I am going to give you to this brave youth, and you must bear him safely and swiftly to his home."

Then turning to Charlie she continued:

"This animal is as swift as an antelope and has the endurance of a bronco, so he will carry you in safety."

"Here are the saddles of the outlaws hanging in these mesquite trees, and you can select the best, which is Don Keno's, and you will find a pair of revolvers in the holsters—see!" and catching hold of a handsome Mexican saddle that hung before her, she showed Charlie a pair of revolver-butts protruding from their leather holsters.

The delighted boy lost no time in bridling and saddling the very fine animal which the woman had selected for him, and then his strange guide led him, by a path through the mesquites, to a ridge seamed with canyons.

At the entrance to one of these she paused and took down several heavy saplings serving as bars, and then said:

"This way there are no guards; but at the other passes there are."

The path through this canyon will lead you to the valley beyond, and the horse will go direct to the nearest ford of the Rio Grande, if you will give him his rein, for he was brought from Texas, and seems anxious always to go back there.

"Now I have set you free, and I wish to do one other good deed this night, and you must help me."

"I will gladly do all that I can for you," said Charlie, earnestly.

"You know something of the emigrant trails that lead toward the cattle country your people are settling up?"

"Yes, I know the trails well."

"There is a train now coming toward the Rio Grande, and it is yet several days' journey from here and coming by the Bancroft Ranch."

"I know the ranch."

"There is some wild country a few miles this side, is there not?"

"Yes."

"In the hills is a canyon known as Dead Man's Pass, I believe?"

"Yes, I know it, for I have been through there with Old Hickory."

"What, Old Hickory, the Ranger Scout?"

"Yes, senorita."

"I am senora, not senorita," said the woman, sadly, and then she continued:

"Where is Old Hickory now?"

"Dead."

"Dead?" and the woman spoke in a tone of quick surprise.

"Yes, senora."

"When did he die? Tell me all."

In a few words Charlie told of the death of his friend, and then the woman said quickly:

"Do you mean that you are not guilty of killing the man Pedro?"

"I never saw him, lady, and Old Hickory was in the grave, as I told you."

"This is a game of Juan's to deceive Don Keno, and I will have my eye on him; but now let me tell you that I wish you to head off the train I spoke of at the Bancroft Ranch, and find if there is a guide with it by the name of Rito."

"If so, you denounce that man as a traitor and a Mexican Marauder, who is leading the train into an ambuscade in the Dead Man's

Pass, for there will Don Keno and his men be to attack it, for well he knows its value."

"You can do with this treacherous guide, Rito, what you like; but you must find some way of warning Don Keno at the Pass, that the fellow's treachery is discovered and that he must fly."

"But why can I not let a party of Rangers capture the Don and his men?"

"No, that must not be, and you must pledge me your word that you will not let him be entrapped."

"But I—"

"I will hear no argument, boy."

"I have saved your life, and I now tell you how you can save a valuable train from being sacked and many lives, and in return I ask you not to let Don Keno be caught unawares."

"At another time you may take him with your Rangers, if you can, but not now, not now."

"Also, I will tell you that I wish you to give me your name and tell me where you can be found, and I will put you in a way of saving many lives and doing much good."

"My name is Charlie Bigelow and I am often at the Rangers' Camp on Hall's Ranch, when I am not at home or on the prairies."

"Well, Senor Charlie, I will not forget to let you hear from me."

"Now, will you do as I ask?"

"Yes, senora, and I'll trust to luck to catch Don Keno another time."

"You may do so; but good-by, and may your life be prosperous."

"But how am I to know you, senora, for I do not know your name and it is too dark for me to see your face well."

"You may call me Rita, and when you receive a letter so signed you may know that you can trust me fully in what I tell you."

"And the name of the guide is Rito?"

"Yes; but you must be off, for I shall have to hasten back, as it would not do for me to be discovered aiding you. Good-by!"

She held forth her hand, and grasping it Charlie said warmly:

"I will never forget you, Senora Rita."

Then he leaped into the saddle and rode away, giving the horse the rein as the mysterious woman had directed him to do.

CHAPTER IX.

A BOY'S WARNING.

AN emigrant train had gone into a "dry camp" upon the prairie before the hour of sunset, although a few miles ahead were visible trees that surely marked the line of a stream.

But the guide had said that they must camp there, so as to strike encampments upon the following nights of their journey when they would have to march certain distances each day to reach a halting-place.

There were grumblers, of course, but the guide knew, and he must be obeyed, for those of the train were strangers in a strange land.

The train consisted of some twenty wagons and twice as many human beings, with horses, cattle and all that went toward enacting a new home in the wilderness.

There were brave men, women and children,

and, whatever the motives that prompted them to seek new homes in the Lone Star State, they all seemed happy at the prospect, and glad that their long journey was near its ending.

It was this train encamped upon the prairie, that Charlie spied as he came riding leisurely along the trail which it was to go.

It was the day following the night upon which he had been so mysteriously aided to escape by the woman who called herself Rita, and his horse showed that he had pushed on hard, to place as far a space as possible between him and any pursuers that might follow upon discovering his flight.

But his horse was a fine one, and had fully sustained the words of the woman that he was as fleet as an antelope and had the endurance of a bronco.

Charlie found Hidalgo to be a blood bay, long tail, slender-limbed and willing to go all the time.

He had unsafely taken him by the trail, to the river, and once there Charlie knew the way and pressed on until he saw the train.

"That must be the train, but it has passed on faster than that strange woman supposed, to be here instead of at Bancroft's Ranch."

But why has the guide gone into a dry camp there, when there is plenty of water near, and Charlie continued to wonder as he rode on.

Those in the train soon discovered his approach, and as to meet a person on the prairies then was something like a vessel meeting another at sea, all stood gazing at him as he rode up.

"Why, he's a boy!"

"But a plucky one, I'll bet!"

"He's well-mounted!"

"Look at his saddle!"

"And his bridle, too!"

"They are perfectly splendid!"

"Worth a small fortune in the silver mounting upon them!"

"Well, he's a game one of his years to be alone upon the prairie!"

Such were the comments of different ones as Charlie rode up and drew rein near the crowd, somewhat taken aback by the excitement he created in the camp.

"I know that horse, saddle and bridle," cried a man with a dark, Mexican-looking face, stepping forward.

He was dressed in buckskin, even to his moccasins, wore a broad slouch hat pulled down over his forehead, and wore a belt of arms, while at his back was slung a rifle.

"Boy, where did you get that horse and outfit?" he asked, in an angry tone, speaking with a slight foreign accent.

"That is none of your business, sir," was the cool reply of Charlie, and the train people wondered to see a man so formidable as their companion addressed so by a boy.

"I'll make it my business to know pretty quick, for you have stolen them," angrily said the man.

"You lie!" and with a flash-like movement Charlie covered the buckskin-clad personage with his revolver.

"Oho! but you are a quick one with tongue and hand, and have got me covered I admit:

but I tell you, friends, I know that horse, saddle and bridle," cried the man.

"Where did you know them?" and Charlie looked the man straight in the face.

"They belong to an officer at the fort that I know."

"And again I say that you lie; but I did not come here to discuss my horse, but to know if there is a guide in this train by the name of Rito?" and Charlie still covered the man with his revolver.

"My name is Rito, and now I think I know why you have that horse."

"Come, boy pard, I guess you have a message for me from the fort," and the man assumed a conciliatory tone.

But Charlie answered, firmly:

"No, I have a message for these people," and he looked over the crowd, for all in the train had now gathered about him.

"And what message have you for us, my fine young fellow?" asked the boss of the train, a large, heavily-bearded man, and he stepped close up to the boy.

"That man is your guide?"

"Yes, he is."

"He says that his name is Rito?"

"By that name we know him."

"Well, sir, I wish to tell you that he is a treacherous guide; that he is a member of the outlaw band known as the Mexican Marauders, and is leading you into an ambush."

The words were spoken in a voice that reached every ear, and all stood spellbound at the bold charge.

They had not liked the guide, they had rather feared him, for he had a hot-headed, overbearing way, and made all feel his importance, and that he was a dangerous man to deal with.

But no one had supposed that he was a traitor.

And now a mere boy came boldly forward and accused him of a heinous crime.

As for the guide, he was at first wholly taken aback by the bold words; but he dared not move, for Charlie still held him covered with his revolver.

But he laughed sneeringly and said:

"Boy, you are a fool to come on this trail and make such a charge against Rito the Guide."

"I made a charge that is true, for to-morrow night he would have had you camp where you would all have been massacred."

"Boy, you shall rue this," and the man fairly writhed with anger.

"I shall kill you if you attempt to raise your hands to a weapon," was Charlie's cool reply, and Rito seemed to feel that this was no idle threat, for he stood motionless, while the train boss said:

"Young sir, this is a terrible charge you make, against a man that we have found faithful to within two days of our journey's end."

"He makes it because I said that I knew that horse, saddle and bridle, and that he stole them," said Rito.

This looked plausible, and Charlie's quick eye saw that many began to feel that his accusation of treachery against the guide was out of revenge for being called a thief.

"I repeat it, sir, the man is dealing wrongly with you."

"How do you know this?"

"I cannot tell you, but he is treacherous," persisted Charlie.

"Do you mean that you cannot tell, or will not?"

"I will not tell how I know it."

"Ah! and yet you say he is a traitor?"

"He is."

"You must give us more proof, or we will be tempted to believe that you came by your horse as Rito says, and hold you instead of him to account."

Charlie's face flushed at the words of the train boss, and he said hotly:

"Hold me if you wish, but only hold him too, and seek a safe camp, while you send some one for the Texas Rangers who have their camp forty miles from here."

"And then?"

"They will know me, and upon my word they will hang that guide," was the ringing reply and the dark face of Rito turned livid at the words.

"We will hold you prisoner and keep an eye on the guide," and the train-boss stepped toward Charlie, passing directly in front of Rito as he did so.

Instantly the guide took advantage of being thus shielded to draw his revolver and pull trigger, while he shouted:

"I'll save trouble by killing you, youngster!"

The bullet just grazed Charlie's forehead and almost instantly, right over the head of the train-boss, was fired his answering shot and the revolver dropped from the shattered arm of the guide, from whose lips came the cry:

"Kill him, for he has broken my arm!"

But Charlie had already wheeled his horse, as his finger touched trigger and dashed away at full speed, keeping several wagons between him and the crowd.

There were a few impulsive ones who fired upon the flying boy, but their shots were harmless and Charlie was soon out of range.

Straight back upon the trail he had come went Charlie; and that night went into a lonely camp in the hills near the canyon known as Dead Man's Pass.

CHAPTER X.

AGAIN IN THE TOILLS.

CHARLIE really enjoyed his solitary camp in the hills, after his days of fatigue and excitement, and had a long night's rest, while he felt contented to know that Hidalgo was also in clover, so to speak, with plenty of grass and cool water.

He ate his breakfast with real relish, broiling a bird upon the coals, and then saddled Hidalgo to attend to the very unpleasant duty before him.

But he had promised the mysterious woman who had saved his life that he would warn the Mexican Marauders that their plan was known and that they must fly before the Texan Rangers in full force would be upon them.

He had seen that he had not killed Rito the Guide, but did not fear but that he was bad

enough wounded to force him to remain in camp, and if he could get away from the Marauders, as soon as he had warned them, Charlie determined to ride with all haste to the Rangers' camp and have Major Hall come on after the train, guide it to its destination, and capture the treacherous Rito.

But first Charlie had the very unpleasant duty to perform of again placing himself in the power of the Marauders, to warn them of their danger; but he hoped, under the circumstances, that they would not hold him a prisoner, and the woman had exacted of him the promise, come what might.

Mounting his horse Charlie rode with considerable dread, mingled with hope, to the canyon where the woman had told him the Marauders would encamp, and he came suddenly upon them just as they had arrived and were dismounting from their horses.

A shout greeted him, and Juan called out in a loud tone:

"Senor chief, here is the boy now."

In an instant Charlie was surrounded by the band of Mexican Marauders, some two-score in number, and the chief confronted him with angry eyes, while he said with a sneer:

"Well, boy, you escaped death then, but you will not escape now, for you have ridden right into our arms."

"I came here on purpose, as I knew you would be here to-day to camp," was Charlie's cool reply, and it surprised the bandits.

"You say that you expected to find us here?"

"Yes, chief."

"How is that?"

"I knew that you were to arrive in the Dead Man's Pass to-day, to lie in wait for an emigrant train that was to camp there to-night, and I came here to meet you."

"Well, what story is this you are telling me?" said Don Keno, amazed that Charlie should know of his intention to attack the train.

"It is no story, for I came to warn you of danger."

"Warn us of danger?"

"Yes."

"Come, boy, this won't pass with us."

"Do you know a man named Rito?"

The chief started and said quickly:

"Yes, what know you of him?"

"He is a member of your band, is he not?"

"Yes."

"You planned with him to be the guide of a rich emigrant-train and to come by certain stages each day so as to hit this canyon for an encampment to-night, or soon after."

"Who told you this?" asked the amazed chief, while all now gazed in wonder upon the boy.

"It matters not who told me, but I know it to be a fact, and that your guide was discovered in his treachery, was wounded, and now lies in the camp of the emigrants, while Sam Hall and his Rangers are now preparing to come upon your trail."

"Ha! this is startling news."

"You will find it so when Major Hall reaches here," coolly said Charlie.

"But how know you this, boy?"

"I left the train in camp last evening, and saw happen then what I have told you."

"And you came here to warn us?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I will not give my reason, but it certainly was not from any love of you as you may well believe."

"And yet you have a reason?"

"I have."

"But refuse to give it?"

"I do."

"How do I know that you are telling the truth?"

"Just wait here a few hours until the Rangers come."

"Are they in full force?"

"They will be in force enough to wipe out Don Keno and his band if they catch him here."

"Boy, you are an enigma, for only two nights ago I sentenced you to death."

"In some mysterious way you escaped from me, and I did double duty in following your trail and coming here, as you say, to head off a train."

"Now you coolly ride into camp on my horse, and tell me of a plan that I did not believe my men knew that I had with Rito, and warn me of danger."

"I do not know what to do."

"Send out a scout to find if I have not told you the truth."

"I believe you have done so; but what to do with you I hardly know."

"Let me go of course."

"No, no, you are one I must know more of."

"You will surely not hold me prisoner when I willingly came into your power again to warn you of danger?"

"You may go upon one condition."

"Name it, senor."

"That you tell me who aided your escape from that cabin-jail of mine."

"Why do you think any one aided me?"

"Because I have had desperate men in there, and not one of them could ever escape, while you, a little boy, got out."

"Perhaps I squeezed through the cracks as I am only a little boy," said Charlie innocently.

"No, you were let out in some way, and by one who holds another key than mine to the padlocks that hold the door."

Charlie said nothing and the chief continued:

"Now tell me who let you out, and you shall go free at once."

"I will not tell you."

"Then, by Heaven, back to my haunt you go with me, boy, and I'll wring the truth from you, and you shall die with the traitor."

"Come, men, mount your horses and back to the Rio Grande, for my secret is known, and this boy tells the truth when he says that Sam Hall and his Rangers will soon be upon us."

"Juan, tie that boy to his horse and let us be off."

Charlie made no reply, but his heart sunk within him to feel that he was once again in the toils of the Mexican Marauders.

CHAPTER XI.

AN OUTLAW EXECUTION.

ONCE again Charlie found himself riding into the camp of the Mexican Marauders, a prisoner.

He glanced about for the woman who had served him so well upon the former occasion, but could not see her anywhere.

The outlaws did not blind him as before, which gave the youth the idea that they did not intend that he should escape.

Straight to the same cage-like cabin he went, and was thrust within by Juan, who also tied his arms behind his back to add to his security.

There Juan stood awhile until the chief, who had stopped at his quarters, came with a couple of padlocks and keys, which he hastily placed upon the staples with the remark:

"Now, young senor, let me see you get out this time!"

The keys were then pocketed by the chief, who walked away, and Charlie was alone once more, with night coming on to add to the gloomy thoughts that swept over him.

The night passed drearily away, with snatches of sleep for the boy prisoner, and when the morning came the Don Keno himself sent him his breakfast by a peon woman with the hope that he would enjoy it, as he should witness an execution in a short while.

Charlie at first thought when he saw the woman that she was the one who had befriended him, but a second glance was sufficient to assure him that the peon and the one who had rescued him were by no means the same person.

The voice of his rescuer had been soft and musical, and her face and form, as well as he could distinguish in the darkness, were beautiful and graceful.

The peon was a trim figure and youthful, and her voice was not unpleasant; but she was, Charlie was sure, very different from the other.

He wished to ask about that other, yet dared not do so for fear of compromising her.

In fact, during the night he had hoped for a visit from her, and another rescue, but alas! she came not as before.

"Who is to be executed?" he asked the woman in Spanish, when she had set his breakfast upon the floor and delivered the message from the Don.

"That the chief will tell the young senor," was the reply of the woman, and she turned and left the cabin, locking the door securely behind her.

Hardly had she done so, when she reopened the door, and looking in again said in a low tone:

"Let the young senor break the bread in two first."

There was something in the manner of the woman that caused Charlie to feel that she had a meaning in her words that he must not disregard.

So he took up the piece of bread and broke it in half, and instantly saw a slip of closely folded paper in it.

Opening this he read what was thereon written in a feminine hand, and which was as follows:

"A scout has verified your words that Rito was discovered in his treachery, and the Rangers were on the trail of the band, so he wishes not to kill you openly, as the men think you should be set free for warning them."

"This the chief will not risk, so he intends to poison your food to-day at dinner, so beware and do not eat it, though give to your plate the appearance that you have done so, and in some way hide it in the cabin."

"Shortly after when the peon woman comes to your cabin, she will tell you just what to do."

There was no signature to this, but Charlie knew well who had written it, and hope welled up in his heart once more to feel that he was not forgotten by the one who had so befriended him before.

The note took away his appetite for the breakfast before him, as he feared that might be poisoned too; so he did not eat it, but laid some of the food in one corner under the bearskin.

Shortly after the door opened and the chief stepped in.

"Well, boy, I want you to see how I treat the traitor who aided you to escape," he said, sternly.

At his words Charlie turned very pale, for he felt that the noble woman had been discovered.

"Come, you must go with me," said the chief, and he led Charlie outside of the cabin.

There, in an open space, the men were drawn up in a line, while one stood apart, his feet and hands securely bound.

"Now, young man, that is the man who aided you to escape," and the chief pointed to the bound man, who was as pale as death, and gazed appealingly toward Charlie.

"He is not the man, sir," said Charlie, firmly, and the face of the man brightened with hope.

"Your denial will not save him, for in his pocket was found a key that fitted the lock upon that cabin, and I have long suspected that he was not true to us."

"Still, senor, that man did not aid me, I assure you."

"He shall die for the act, at any rate."

"You surely will not kill him when I say he is innocent."

"I will, unless you tell me who is the guilty one."

"That I will not."

"Then he must die."

"Oh, senor, tell who it was or he will kill me," cried the doomed man in an agony of dread.

Charlie was in a terrible position, for he did not wish to see the man shot down for a crime of which he was innocent.

He could not inform upon the woman, and he knew not what to do.

Just as he stood in a quandary there rode up to the side of the chief a woman.

It was the one who had saved him, and told him to call her Rita.

The face of the boy brightened, for she would surely not let the man die, and he gazed earnestly at her beautiful face, expecting her to speak.

She was superbly mounted, and sat in her saddle like a perfect horsewoman, while her form was elegant, and her face very lovely.

She wore a close-fitting habit, with short skirt, and about her slender waist was a belt of arms, while she had the appearance of one who would and could use them.

She drew rein when near the young prisoner, glanced at him with no sign of recognition, then let her eyes rest upon the accused man, and smiled as the chief addressed her in a pleasant tone.

"Oh, senora! do not let me die, for the boy has told the chief that I am not guilty of aiding him to escape!" cried the man in piteous tones.

"Who does the boy say is guilty?" and the woman turned calmly to the chief, who answered:

"He will not tell me, yet says yonder fellow is not the one."

The woman made no reply, and the chief again turned to Charlie:

"You refuse to tell who aided you?"

"I do."

"Remember, I accuse that man, and he shall die for the crime."

"I cannot help it, though I am very sorry for him."

"His life will be upon your head."

"I would have the life of the real one upon my conscience, did I tell," calmly responded Charlie.

The chief made no reply, but drawing his revolver, stepped out before the bound man and about ten paces from him.

"Mercy, Don Keno, mercy!" cried the man in pitiful tones.

But Don Keno smiled grimly without reply, while the poor wretch dropped upon his knees and began to mutter a prayer.

"Now, young Texan, tell the secret I demand of you, or I will kill that man for the crime of which you say he is guiltless," cried Don Keno.

"That man is not guilty, but I refuse to tell who is," was Charlie's firm reply.

Instantly the revolver began to rattle, and the poor wretch sunk in a heap with half a dozen bullets in his body.

CHAPTER XII. CHARLIE "PLAYS 'POSSUM."

BACK to his wooden cage went poor Charlie, shocked greatly by the tragedy just enacted before him, and which he dared not prevent by betraying the real rescuer, for fear a greater one would have taken place, for he did not doubt but that the merciless chief would slay the woman too.

Nervously he paced to and fro in the little cabin, his arms tied behind him, and his face pale with his pent up emotions.

At last there came a clanking of the chains that held the door, and once more the peon woman entered, bearing a tray with his dinner.

"The chief has sent the young scout some food," she said quietly, as she set the tray down upon the bearskin.

As she rose to an upright position, she quickly freed his arms of the thongs that bound them, and at the same time slipped into his hand a piece of paper.

Taking up the breakfast tray, she left the cabin and Charlie quickly glanced over his

note, standing near a crack in between the walls that gave him good light.

It read:

"Do not touch one morsel of the food sent you, for it has all been poisoned by the chief."

"Hide sufficient to give an idea that you have eaten heartily, and soon after lie down upon your face and pretend to be dead."

"The peon will return for the dishes, report that you are dead, and the chief being absent, I will send her to wrap a blanket about you and sew it up well, our mode of burial here."

"A hole will be left in the blanket for you to breathe through, and at dark I will order two of the band to take you off and bury you in the graveyard on the hillside."

"When they place you by the open grave, you will find that they will not remain there to complete their work, and you must not be alarmed at anything that transpires, for no harm will befall you."

This note, like the other, bore no signature, and Charlie chewed it up by piecemeal so as not to leave any evidence against the woman should anything occur to thwart her plan to rescue him.

"It's a better dinner than that one if it is paper, and that in the tray does look tempting," said the hungry boy, as he prepared the dishes to look as though he had eaten from them, and hid his allowance under the bear-skin with the untasted breakfast.

It was late in the afternoon before the peon woman had brought his dinner, so that the shadows were lengthening from the west, when he followed the advice given him in the letter, and "played 'possum."

Not long after the chains again rattled and the door opened.

The peon woman entered, and then with a startled cry ran out.

Soon after she returned with others, and Charlie felt a light touch upon his head, and then upon his pulse, while the voice of the woman who had before rescued him said softly:

"Yes, he is dead. Go, Nuna, and get a blanket to prepare the body for burial, and you, Mendez, get a companion and dig a grave for the boy."

"Then come and let me know and I will go with you to the graveyard."

The man Mendez left the cabin with the woman, and soon after Nuna the peon entered.

Singing a doleful song she rolled Charlie up in a blanket, and began to sew up the ends very carefully.

It was a strange experience for the boy, and though a hole was left just under his nostrils for him to breathe through, he could not but shudder at the thought of feeling that he was being prepared for burial while yet alive.

At last the work of the woman was completed and Charlie was alone, unable to move, try he ever so hard.

Deeper and deeper grew the shadows until twilight came, and then the door swung back, and a man entered.

Charlie could not of course see him, or know what he was doing; but he heard him mutter:

"I don't like this burying bodies by night, and we would have had the boy planted long ago, if the senora hadn't come up there and made us dig the grave so deep—well, Mendez, are you ready?"

"Yes," said another voice, "I went up to tell the senora, but Nuna says she has gone riding, and left word for us to bury the boy, so let us hurry up, for night is upon us."

Quickly Charlie felt himself seized in the strong arms of the outlaws and borne out of the cabin, while, as they passed along and met any of the band a word or two would pass as to the cause of the boy's sudden death.

"He was doubtless scared to death, though he seemed to have plenty of nerve," said Mendez, as he turned into the trail leading up the hillside to the graveyard.

The shadows deepened as they entered the timber, and the men quickened their pace as though anxious to get their ghastly work over.

At last the grave was reached, and Charlie was tumbled down upon the loose earth in no light manner.

It was an appalling moment for him, for what if the one who was to save him came not at once, then he would be dropped into the grave and the earth hurled in rapidly upon him.

He felt like giving utterance to one long, loud cry, hoping to frighten away the two men; but then he remembered that he was powerless to move, so controlled the impulse.

Suddenly there broke from the lips of one of the men:

"Holy Virgin! save, oh save us!"

A yell came from the other, and Charlie heard them bound away like race-horses.

Before he had time for thought he felt a hand upon him, and heard the words:

"They have gone off like deer, but I must work quickly."

It was the voice of the mysterious woman, and with wonderful rapidity she freed the half-smothered boy from his close quarters.

In spite of himself Charlie started at beholding a white-robed form bending over him that looked strangely like what the superstitious call a ghost.

"I played ghost to frighten them and have done so, though I put you to a terrible ordeal, my poor boy."

"But I dared not release you the night before, as the Don would have found me out."

"Now, here is your horse, the same one, Hidalgo, the Don's saddle and bridle, and I managed to steal for you your own arms, so mount and away at once."

"Follow the same trail as you did before, and remember that you shall hear from me again."

Charlie began a deluge of thanks, but the woman placed her hand lightly over his mouth and said quickly:

"Come, you have no time to talk, for you must be off, as those frightened fellows will bring the whole band up here to search for the ghost."

Thus urged Charlie sprung into the saddle, grasped the woman's hand and rode off, while she glided away through the timber, looking indeed strangely like a ghost.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MEETING AT THE RIVER.

CHARLIE knew his horse from his other trip upon him, and armed with his rifle once more

and splendidly mounted, he felt as though he had nothing to fear from outlaw or Indian.

The horse seemed, as the woman Rita had said, anxious to go back to Texas, and at a good pace held on his way toward the Rio Grande, following the trail unerringly through the darkness.

At last the ford was reached, and Charlie drew rein for a rest before crossing, and because he wished to reconnoiter on foot ere he went over, as he was very likely to run upon some one encamped there that it would be better for him to avoid.

Hitching Hidalgo in a secluded spot, he went on foot down to the ford and carefully surveyed the other shore as well as he could through the darkness.

At last a brightening of the eastern skies told him that the moon was rising, and he kept his position, confident that it would light up the other shore sufficiently for him to see any object moving there.

He had not long to wait before he saw a form come out of the shadow of the overhanging banks and stand peering toward the shore where he was.

After a short inspection the man returned to the shadow.

"It's good I didn't attempt to go across," chuckled Charlie, glad at his escape, and he continued his watching and soon after beheld a horseman ride into view.

It was evidently the same man that he had before seen on foot, and who had been reconnoitering, and, apparently satisfied, was coming across the river.

"I'll bag him," muttered Charlie, and he hastily ran back to where he had left Hidalgo.

One of the necessary attachments to a Mexican's fully equipped saddle is a lasso, and there was one among the chief's equipments which Senor Rita had presented Charlie with.

When he returned to his point of observation he had this lasso in his hand, and coiling it ready to throw, he crouched down upon the bank in the shelter of a mesquite bush.

The horseman was now nearly across the river, and must pass under the bank within a few feet of the boy.

He was advancing slowly and cautiously, as though ready for any danger, and evidently expected that he might meet a foe on the other side.

Nearer and nearer he came, and at last reached the shore and turned into the trail leading up to the heights.

As he came out on the bank his eyes turned upon the mesquite bush, as though he realized what a good place of ambush it would be, and perhaps recalled that it had been used for such purpose in his own recollection.

But Charlie did not move, and the horseman rode by, while from the lips of the boy came the whisper:

"It is Juan the Marauder!"

He had not, however, the fortune to get out of range without a surprise, for Charlie, who was an adept at lariat throwing, lashed the coil with strong arm and skillful hand, and with a jerk the arms of Juan were pinioned to his

side, while his horse, bounding forward, dragged him heavily to the ground.

Leaving the end of the lariat attached to the mesquite bush, Charlie slid down by it to the trail, and presented a revolver at the head of the half stunned outlaw, while he said in his light way:

"Juan, I want you."

"Curses! Is it you, you young devil?"

"Correct! It is the boy you lied against and sought to have shot, and he has got you in close quarters, and would just as soon kill you as not."

"How did you get out of that jail this time?" asked the amazed outlaw, awed by Charlie's pistol and with his arms held fast by the lariat, which Charlie kept a firm hold on.

"Let me first wrap this rope around you and take your belt of arms off, and I'll tell you that I got out by the aid of the one who helped me before, so that you see your chief murdered the wrong man as my rescuer."

"What do you intend to do with me, boy?"

"I have not decided, but you will know after a jury of Rangers sit on your case."

"Holy Virgin! do you intend to turn me over to them?" cried the man in alarm.

"I will if you behave yourself; but if you do not I shall kill you; but, come, sit up and let me tie you, for I don't like this place much."

The Mexican could do nothing else but obey, and he was soon securely bound and disarmed.

"Now there is your horse waiting for you, so you will have a chance to ride," and bopping his prisoner, Charlie went after the animal that had stopped not far up the trail.

After some difficulty he caught him, and aiding his prisoner to mount, he got Hidalgo, and the two set off across the Rio Grande, Charlie happy at his good luck, and Juan, the outlaw, utterly wretched at his misfortune, and mumbling prayers and imprecations commingled as he followed in the rear of his young captor.

CHAPTER XIV.

TURNING TRAITOR.

In safety Charlie and his prisoner reached the Texan shore, and the youth was anxious to place as great a distance as possible between himself and pursuit.

He knew well his danger, over a hundred miles as he was from where he wished to go, and with a prisoner upon his hands, having to pass through a country full of hostiles; but he did not shrink from the work before him, and set off at a gallop as soon as he reached good ground.

In the mean time Juan had stopped his continued swearing and praying at his ill fortune, and set to thinking.

His thoughts ran on a way to extricate himself from his difficulty, and at last he decided upon a plan.

"I say, young senor," he called out in a respectful tone.

"What is it, Greaser?" asked Charlie, without looking around.

"You think you have got a prize, don't you?"

"Yes, one kind of a prize."
 "Don't you wish to do better?"
 "I intend to, as soon as I reach the Ranger camp."
 "Now wouldn't you rather have captured the chief than me?"
 "You bet; but as I cannot get pudding I take pie."
 "You can get pudding, as you call it."
 "You don't mean it."
 "I do."
 "Sure?"
 "Yes, but you can't have pie and pudding both."
 "Oh! you mean you can tell me where I can get Don Keno?"
 "Yes."
 "He is not at the stronghold?"
 "No."
 "Where is he?"
 "We left the stronghold together."
 "Where is he?"
 "I am not a fool, senor."
 "You wish to offer terms?"
 "I do."
 "Name them."
 "You call me pie?"
 "Yes."
 "And Don Keno pudding?"
 "Yes."
 "I'll give you the pudding for the pie."
 "You will put Don Keno into my grip if I will let you go?"
 "Yes."
 "I'll think of it."
 "Better think quick."
 "Why?"
 "Because you are going away from where the Don is."
 "Ah, is that so?"
 "It is."
 "Well, Senor Juan, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, you know."
 "But you can get the other bird in hand if you will let me go into the bush."
 Charlie was silent a moment, and then suddenly drew rein.
 "Come, let us understand each other," he said seriously, and in a tone that showed he had made up his mind to act.
 "What do you wish to know?"
 "Is Don Keno near here?"
 "He is."
 "On the Texas shore?"
 "Yes."
 "How far from here?"
 "A league."
 "You are sure?"
 "I left him there an hour or so ago."
 "Where is he?"
 "That is my secret."
 "Is he alone?"
 "There are none of his men with him."
 "How long will he remain?"
 "Until my return."
 "Explain."
 "First let us understand each other."
 "Well."
 "If I tell you all, and aid you to capture Don Keno, you will set me free?"

"Juan, listen to me, and though I am not a man, I mean all that I say."
 "I am listening, senor."
 "You deserve hanging."
 The Mexican started.
 "You are a great villain, and you lied to your chief about me, for you well know I never saw the man you accused me of killing."
 "Go on, senor."
 "You would have seen me shot for a crime of which I was not guilty."
 "You were nothing to me and I was looking out for myself."
 "True, and my idea is that you found the deserter, discovered that he had gold and robbed and killed him, and finding me as you did, used me as a tool to hide your deed."
 "You've got a long head, boy."
 "Now I have no love for you."
 "No."
 "And I know you would cut my throat with real delight did you get the chance."
 "Ah, senor!"
 "It is true, and so you see I shall not trust you; but I will make terms with you."
 "I am anxious to come to terms."
 "Now you want me to spare your life?"
 "In return for the secret I will tell you."
 "In return for your placing me in a way to capture Don Keno?"
 "Yes, I will do it."
 "Do so, and I will let you go free."
 "You mean this by the Virgin?"
 "I swear that I will let you go free, if you place Don Keno in my power."
 "Good!"
 "But understand me."
 "Well, senor?"
 "You have a desire to become chief yourself, of the Mexican Marauders."
 "Your head is broad as well as long, boy."
 "Never mind the head, but that is your little game."
 "What if it is?"
 "I intend to break you up on that."
 "How?" and the Mexican looked alarmed.
 "I mean that I intend to break up the gang of outlaws."
 "You cannot."
 "You are mistaken, for I can."
 "I would like to know how."
 "I will tell you how I did it when the work is done.
 "Now put Don Keno in my power and I will take you both to the Rangers as captives."
 "Don Keno will be strung up, but you shall be set free one week from the day you arrive in their camp."
 "No, you cannot play that game on me."
 "What game?"
 "They will hang me."
 "I pledge you my word that they will not."
 "They will not mind you."
 "They will."
 "No."
 "They will, or I will refuse to lead them against your stronghold."
 "Ahl but will you do this?"
 "I will, and, after I have captured the Don through you, they must accept my terms with

you and I will myself see that no one attempts to harm you."

"I believe you are square, boy."

"I try to be, and in this case I promise you that I will not tell them how the Marauders can be taken if they do not guarantee my pledge to you."

"They will force you."

"You and your chief tried the forcing business on with me and found that it would not work."

"That's so."

"Do you trust me?"

"I do not know what to do."

"Well, I do."

"What?"

"Take you to the Rangers and have them string you up."

"I cry hands up, boy, so I'll do as you say."

"It's a bargain then?"

"Yes, I turn traitor," was the low reply.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MARAUDER'S STORY.

BOTH Charlie and his prisoner seemed relieved after the compromise of a life for a life had been made between them.

There is little doubt but that Juan was jealous of his chief in more ways than one.

He wanted to be chief himself, and was also in love with the Senora Rita; but his life was dearer to him than ambition and love, and for the present he was content to give up the two for the one, but registered a silent vow that he would not wholly give up striving to win the beautiful Mexican woman, once he was set free by Charlie.

"Where is Don Keno?" asked Charlie, as Juan turned back toward the river.

"Do you see that dark object yonder?" and Juan nodded toward where the horizon was broken by a dark mass rising above it.

"Yes."

"It is a hacienda."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, a Texan lives there who married a Mexican wife, and he is seldom molested by our people or yours on that account."

"What is his name?"

"We call him Don Henry and his wife the Donna Isabella."

"I have heard of him, for the Rangers have frequently stopped there and he is very kind to them."

"Yes, and he is just as kind to the Mexican troops and more kind to the Marauders."

"Ah! he is the friend of all who visit him?"

"Just so; but he is Don Keno's particular friend, and the chief hopes to marry his daughter, the pretty Senorita Leone."

"The Texan cannot certainly know who he is?"

"Oh, yes."

"And would allow his daughter to marry that man?"

"Of course, for they are pards, you see."

"I do not understand you."

"Why, the chief and Don Henry are pards."

"You see, I might as well tell you all."

"Certainly."

"Well, Don Henry plays fast and loose, and any little game of value he brings into the hand of the chief he has a share in it."

"Do you mean that Don Henry is a spy for the chief?"

"Yes."

"I see; but does the Senorita Leone know this?"

"Oh no, for she looks upon Don Keno as a Mexican ranchero of wealth, and to her he is known as Don Reno."

"But does her mother know who and what he is?"

"Oh, yes, for she is in the secret with Don Henry."

"And they both wish their daughter to marry Don Keno?"

"They do; but the Senorita Leone does not love him, I am sure."

"Well, if we capture Don Keno we will break up this little game of deviltry."

"Yes, and I would be glad for the girl's sake, as Don Keno is already married."

"Indeed?"

"He is."

"Where is his wife?"

"At the camp."

"She lives there with him?"

"Yes."

"And knows him to be an outlaw?"

"She knows it now, but she did not when she married him."

"He deceived her then?"

"He did, indeed, and her parents, too."

"You see she comes from down on the coast, and met the Don there and loved him."

"He was then an outlaw captain, but the soldiers made it too hot for him and he had to come up here."

"I met him when I had half a dozen men under me,"

"What were you doing?"

"Killing, stealing and raiding in Texas."

"I see."

"Yes, and the Don had a dozen men, so we joined forces, and gradually added to our band."

"Some years ago the Don left for awhile, and he brought back with him his wife, and I recognized her as a young girl whom I had known and loved before I had to hunt the chaparrals to save my neck."

"She believed him to be a Mexican officer stationed in the hills, and for a long time he deceived her; but one day I told her, and I never saw a woman grow so mad in my life as she did."

"She did not say anything, however, and I guess she got over her mad."

"And still, having a wife, he wishes to marry the daughter of Don Henry?"

"Yes, that is his little game, for he could have a wife in two places, like a sailor, you know."

Charlie said nothing, but he thought deeply, and it was only when Juan halted in some mesquite bushes not far from the hacienda that loomed up before them that he asked:

"Well, what is to be done now?"

"Capture the Don," was the quiet response of the traitor outlaw.

CHAPTER XVI.

SETTING THE TRAP.

"Now, how are we to get hold of the Don?" asked Charlie, as the two halted among the mesquites.

"I'll go forward, call up the man at the gate, and ask him to tell Don Keno that I wish to see him."

"You will do no such thing."

"Why not?"

"Because I won't trust you."

"Didn't I tell you I would help you capture the Don if you would spare my life?"

"Oh, yes; but I am no fool, for if I let you go it is more than likely that you and the Don would bag me."

"I hope you don't think I'd do that," said the Mexican, in an injured tone.

"I know that you would, so you'll have to study up another plan."

"I don't know any other."

"Then I will propose one."

"What is it?" and it was evident that Juan was deeply disappointed, for he had counted upon getting the boy to release him to help him capture the Don, when it was his intention to quickly finish up Charlie.

But Charlie had been with Old Hickory too long not to have cut his eye-teeth in cunning, and was, besides, a very bright and precocious youth of his age, so was not to be caught napping.

"I will tie you here to a mesquite bush, gag you to keep you from talking in your sleep, and then go to the hacienda and tell the gatekeeper to ask the Don to come at once to the stronghold.

"Then, when he comes along the trail, I will lariat him or shoot him."

"He won't come if the gatekeeper tells him a stranger called for him."

"That's so. Well, I have another plan!"

"Well?"

"You can go, and I will go with you."

"Why, don't you know that the gatekeeper will see that I am tied?"

"Yes, if you went tied; but I'll fix you so that he won't see it, and I'll do it now."

Charlie then set to work and fastened his prisoner's legs securely to his saddle.

Then he set his arms free, and mounting behind him he rode toward the hacienda gate.

Halting in the shadow of the wall Charlie led the horse up to the little window, and then hopped him so that he could not run off.

Then he took his stand in the shadow and leveling his revolver at the Mexican said quietly:

"Now call up the *portero*, Juan."

The Marauder had nothing to do but obey, and he knocked loudly upon the window.

"Who is it?" asked a voice sullenly from within.

"Juan, the comrade of Don Reno," was the answer.

"I will open the gate and let you enter, but I did not expect you back," said the voice within, and Charlie remembered that Juan had told him that the Don had sent him to the stronghold for the band, to attack a train which Don Henry had told him of.

"No, I did not expect to return so soon; but I

met a messenger that wanted to see Don Reno, so returned to tell him.

"I will let you in as soon as I can throw a *serape* around me."

"Tell him to come to the window—that you do not wish to come in."

"Quick!"

The whisper of Charlie was earnest, and Juan did not dare disregard it, for, could he have gotten the *portero* to come to the gate, he would have told him he was a prisoner, and thus forced Charlie to fly for his life, as the men of the ranch were at hand.

"I do not care to come in, only let me see you a moment at the window, good Luez," said Juan, who knew the *portero* well, having often been to the hacienda with Don Keno.

The stout panel of the little window was drawn back at this, and Luez looked out.

"Well, Señor Juan?"

"Please say to Don Reno" (such was the name the chief went by at the hacienda) "that I found it necessary to return for him, and that I will await him at the ruined hacienda below, where there is some one whom he wishes to see."

"Shall I tell him who it is?"

Juan spoke with Charlie's revolver covering him and answered:

"Yes, tell him it is his Texas messenger and he will understand."

"I will do so, Señor Juan; but I am sorry that you cannot come in and seek a good bed, for these are dangerous times to be abroad in."

The panel was closed and Luez shuffled off, while Charlie took the hopples off of the horse and sprung up behind Juan.

"Who is the Texas messenger?" he asked.

"His spy in San Antonio."

"Ah!"

"I knew that would fetch him, for he was expecting him, and doubtless will think I met him at the ford and so came back for him."

"And where is this ruined ranch?"

"Down the river a mile, not far off the main trail."

"He will come, you think?"

"I know it."

"And there is a good place to ambush him there?"

"The best in the world."

"To lariat him?"

"Yes."

"Good, for I do not wish to kill him."

"Let me help you lariat him."

"How?"

"I'll take the horse and you the Don."

"I will not free you to do so."

"You are terribly suspicious."

"Yes, I don't trust you."

"Well, you can tie my feet so I cannot get away and untie my hands so that I can throw the lariat."

"I'll see when we get there."

With this noncommittal reply Charlie again tied up the arms of his prisoner and mounting his own horse the two rode on together to the ruined hacienda.

CHAPTER XVII.

SPRINGING THE TRAP.

THE ruined hacienda was certainly a charming place for an ambush, if I may so express it, or for the committal of some red deed.

Its walls were still standing but a fire had destroyed the roof and interior long years before, and within what was once its living rooms trees had grown.

The trail from Don Henry's ranch led directly by the ruin, passing close to the walls and Charlie's bright eyes took in the situation at once.

"Juan, I will get you to help me capture the Don," he said.

"I'll do it."

"He comes right along here, you say?"

"Yes."

"No other trail he can take?"

"None."

"He may go off some distance from the ruin?"

"Don't you see the chapparral there prevents it?"

"True: well, do you see that wall?"

"I do."

"It is about nine feet high."

"Just about."

"And that tree from the other side grows over it so as to shelter any one standing there."

"I see that it does."

"Now you get up there and I'll leave your hands loose, but I'll tie you to the tree."

"When the Don reaches this spot, you throw your lariat and catch him."

"And the horse?"

"I'll look after the horse, and I'll keep my eye on you too, so that if you stoop down to untie your feet, just expect a bullet as a visitor."

"I wish you would trust me, boy."

"I can't, Juan, I can't."

"Where will you stand?"

"Right here in this doorway."

"All right; let us get our places, for the Don will soon be along."

Charlie rode into the ruin, and placing the horse alongside of the wall and releasing Juan's hands, he got him up to the desired position.

Then he made his feet fast and gave him his lariat.

Hitching the horses in the ruin, he then took his stand at the door, his rifle leaning against the wall by his side and his lariat coiled in his hand.

Thus he waited, and it was but a minute before he heard the fall of boos.

Then he remembered that he had neglected to gag Juan, and fearing that he might call out and warn the Don, thus placing him on an equality with him, Charlie said in a loud whisper.

"Juan?"

"Well?"

"If you call out to warn the Don I'll answer with my revolver."

"I am not going to play you false, boy."

"See that you do not."

The next moment a horseman came in sight,

coming out of the chaparral, and plainly visible in the moonlight.

There was no doubt but that it was Don Keno, and both Juan and Charlie got ready for their work.

Charlie fully realized his position.

That he was but a boy, and had a man prisoner there, while he was daringly attempting to take another."

A mistake on his part, a cry on the part of Juan, might be fatal to his plans.

But he never for an instant wavered, and his nerve was as firm as iron.

Nearer and nearer came the Don, until suddenly he drew rein, not thirty paces from the ruin.

Charlie saw that he carried a pistol in his hand, as though ready for any danger.

"Ho, Juan!"

He called out in his stern voice.

Before Charlie could put his head back and whisper to Juan to answer, the prisoner called back:

"Si, señor chief, I am here."

"Bueno," cried the Don, and replacing his pistol in his belt he rode in toward the opening, his horse showing signs of fear, which caused his rider to say:

"On, good Aztec, it is a friend and not a foe."

Hardly had the last word left his lips when down from the wall came Juan's coil, and settled over the head and shoulders of Don Keno, while out from the opening in the wall shot Charlie's lariat and encircled the arching neck of the fine animal ridden by the chief.

Each lariat was made fast, and as the horse bounded forward he was brought up with a jerk, while Don Keno was dragged from his saddle and fell to the earth just as Charlie sprung to his side, and pointing his revolver at his head cried:

"Don Keno, the Marauder, you are my game."

The Don was considerably amazed, shocked and enraged, while the lariat held his arms close to his side, so that he could only hiss forth:

"Curse you, boy, I thought you were dead."

"No, I didn't take your poison; but you'll be dead if you so much as crook your elbow."

With this Charlie disarmed the man, whose profanity broke forth in Mexican and English oaths that were fearful to hear.

But Charlie very coolly bound his prisoner securely, the while keeping an eye upon Juan, and then left him lying on the ground while he went up to help his treacherous ally to descend from the wall.

"See, Don Keno, I have a pard of yours here."

The outlaw chief cast one glance at Juan and shouted forth:

"Hai you are the traitor that has done this."

"No, Don Keno, the boy captured me as cleverly as he has you, and to save my life I got you into the thongs. It was a case of life or death with me, and I preferred to live and let you die."

"That is all of it."

"Oh! but you shall rue this," growled Don Keno.

"It is my opinion that this young Texan will take good care of me by not allowing you to escape, Don Keno."

Charlie had been getting the horses ready for the road during this little talk between the two outlaws, and now said:

"Come, Don Keno, you must mount, for we have a long trail before us."

"Boy, I have got plenty of gold to give you if you will let me go," said the chief.

"Don't talk, Don, for I'm not for sale. Mount your horse."

"Never!"

"Juan, help me drag him up, and I'll tie him in his saddle."

Seeing that he would be roughly handled, Don Keno mounted with Charlie's aid, and his feet were then bound beneath his horse, and his hands left tied behind him.

Juan was then served in like manner, and mounting Hidalgo, and holding the lariat as a reins to drive his novel team, Charlie started off the horses at a gallop along the trail into the interior, as happy as a lark at his double capture, and the anticipation that his good work was not yet finished.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CHASE ON THE PRAIRIE.

CHARLIE certainly had his hands full in taking care of his two prisoners.

But he had accomplished more than he had ever dreamed it was in his power to do, and what many a ranger had undertaken and failed in doing, so he was resolved to get his prisoners into camp if he neither ate a mouthful or slept a wink in doing so.

He went along the trail at a slow canter, and was glad to see that Don Keno and Juan were like himself splendidly mounted, so that he had no fear of their horses breaking down if pushed to a rapid pace.

The two men rode away in silence, the chief glancing daggers at Juan, who wore a look of indifference.

The dawn came at last, and Charlie searched about for a good halting-place.

At length they reached a small stream, and in the shadow of some trees halted for rest and breakfast.

The horses were watered and staked out, the prisoners dismounting willingly, and they threw themselves down upon the ground and watched Charlie build a fire and prepare breakfast, for each one of the trio was supplied with provisions for their journey, it being the duty of a good prairie-man to always go prepared for any emergency; and a thorough Texan would no sooner think of going on a jaunt without his supplies than a sea-captain would think of sailing without first storing his ship.

Releasing one prisoner at a time Charlie allowed him to eat his breakfast, and when both had finished he sat down to partake of his own repast.

Don Keno seemed really delighted to see that Charlie treated Juan in the same manner that he did himself, and said with a sneer:

"Your treachery is poorly rewarded I see, for the boy does not trust you."

"Oh, I'll get my reward, senor," was the reply.

"I doubt it, unless you get hanged."

"You will get your neck in the noose, Don Keno, while I go free."

"Juan, you are a fool, for the boy will hand you over to the Rangers as he will me."

"But they will spare me."

"Bah! you know Sam Hall and his Rangers too well to think that they would spare a Marauder."

"If the boy asks it."

"The boy will be conveniently absent after giving us up, and you will be hanged with me."

Juan turned pale, for he liked not this thought.

"Better plan with me some way to get ourselves out of this scrape," said Don Keno, when Charlie went to lead up the horses.

"How can we?" eagerly asked Juan.

"I am sure I do not know; but we must concoct some plan of action that will get us out of this, and we have no time to lose."

Thoroughly alarmed, for he now began to doubt the promise of Charlie to him, Juan began to think of some way of escape, and both men remained silent and buried in deep thought as they rode along.

But Charlie was well aware that they were most willing to make their escape if they could, and so kept his eyes upon them every instant, watching the thongs that bound them to see that they did not slip their hands through.

Suddenly Don Keno's dark eyes became fixed upon an object in front, and he said after a moment:

"Boy, you are going to have trouble."

"What do you mean?"

"If I mistake not, I saw an Indian's head above the roll in the prairie yonder."

"Well, we will make a circuit so as to avoid that rise," said Charlie, turning off of his course.

"What if we are attacked by Indians?"

"We will have to run for it," answered Charlie.

"Suppose they corral you?"

"Well, I will have to fight it out and stand them off."

"And we will help you, of course, for our lives as well as yours depend upon it," remarked Juan.

"It is mighty little help I would get from you," muttered Charlie, and just then over the rise in the prairie came dashing a score of Comanche warriors in all the glory of war-paint.

They had seen by the change in the course of the three horsemen that they had been discovered, so they at once charged down upon the little party.

"Now we must run, and I warn you I will stand no foolishness even if red-skins are after us," said Charlie, and he urged the three horses into a run.

The Comanches were yet a quarter of a mile distant, but they seemed well mounted, and were coming on rapidly.

Hidalgo and the animals ridden by Don Keno and Juan ran well, however, and the Indians did

not gain any though pushing their ponies hard.

"We are driving our horses hard when there is no need for it," said the Don.

"I think there is much need for it," answered Charlie, curtly.

"You can easily teach those red-skins a lesson and thus save our horseflesh."

"How?"

"You drop back while we ride on, and drop one of their number with your rifle."

"I'll take your advice as to the slackening up and firing on them, but not allow you to ride on, for I have half an idea I would never catch up with you again," and Charlie smiled while Don Keno scowled.

"You don't think we would want to escape bound as we are?" asked Juan.

"Oh, yes; for you could get your horses on the trail to your stronghold, and doubtless get through all right; but, as my old school-teacher used to say, 'united we stand, divided we fall,' and we three will keep together."

"Oh, but you are a cunning wolf!" growled Juan, and Charlie laughed, while he reined back the three horses to a slower pace and soon came to a halt.

The Indians divined his intention to fire, and drew up at what they considered a safe distance.

But Charlie raised the rifle which he had found hanging to Don Keno's saddle, and after a short aim touched the trigger.

With the crack of the weapon a mustang dropped dead, and the Indians turned and fled in hot haste, followed by the brave whose pony had gone down.

"Let them have the other shots!" cried Don Keno, for the weapon was a repeating rifle, and Charlie sent half a dozen bullets flying after the red skins, and with an aim that was true enough to bring down another pony and wound a warrior, for one was seen to reel in his saddle.

"You are a crack shot, boy, to hit at this distance," said Don Keno.

With a smile Charlie reloaded the weapon, and the three rode on, the red-skins still following, but at a safe distance, for the most formidable firearm they had among them was an old army musket.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE FACE SEEN IN THE MESQUITE BUSHES.

As the horses of the three fugitives seemed so far superior to their ponies, the Comanches soon gave up the chase, and it may be they were influenced in so doing by the deadly repeating rifle of which they had gotten a sample at long range.

Charlie drew down then to a canter, and soon after edged round into the trail he had been following when driven off by the red skins.

A halt of an hour was made at noon, but Charlie had begun to suspect his prisoners of some plot, and so fed them himself, refusing to untie their arms.

At this they grumbled savagely at first, and then begged, but the youth was obdurate and told them they had either to eat what he fed them or go without.

Again mounting, they pressed on at a good

rate of speed, the prisoners becoming more and more gloomy as they neared their journey's end, and which they began to fear would be the end of their journey of life.

Knowing that the horses could not be pushed on through the night without injuring them, and disliking to harm three such splendid animals, Charlie reluctantly made up his mind to encamp, and began to look out for a good place.

Just at sunset he rode into a clump of timber, where he had before stopped with Old Hickory on more than one occasion.

There was good water and grass to be found there, and he had plenty of game for supper, which he had shot upon the ride during the afternoon.

As he rode up to the camping place, he failed to see a face peering at him from some mesquite bushes that grew thick in one side of the motte.

Don Keno happening to glance in that direction, caught sight of the face and started, while his lips nearly uttered an exclamation of surprise.

But he checked himself in time and glanced meaningly at Juan, who saw by the chief's flushed face that something had occurred.

Straight to the spot he had selected, Charlie rode, and dismounting, soon had his prisoners standing by his side.

Then he tied their feet while he led the horses away to stake them out upon the prairie to feed.

Coming back he soon had a fire, and the scent of broiling meat rose on the air and all appeared hungry, while Don Keno was really merry, laughing and chatting very little like a man who was on the eve of death.

Juan smiled at the remarks of the chief, and also seemed less cast down.

Soon the supper was ready, consisting of broiled venison, birds, a tin cup of coffee each, a raw onion, baked potatoes and some crackers.

Charlie was proud of the supper he had prepared for his prisoner guests and himself, and had not the heart to keep their hands tied so that they could not enjoy it, so he relieved them of the bonds about their arms, but sat opposite to them, a revolver lying upon each side ready for the grasp of either hand.

While they thus sat eating their supper and laughing at the Don chatting, the same face which had peered out from the mesquite bushes was now gazing at them from behind a large tree near by.

It was a haggard face, the eyes deep sunken, but full of fire, and the man seemed to have had bad luck.

With eagerness that showed intense hunger he gazed at the tempting supper, and gritted his teeth as though to control the impulse to bound forward and grasp some of the edibles and devour them.

The Don made himself really entertaining during the meal, but all the while his eyes were roving searchingly about the timber as though he expected to see the same face that had appeared to him as he rode into the timber.

"So you think, my boy, that you will reach the Ranger camp to-morrow afternoon?" he said in a pleasant way.

"Yes, if we are not chased off our trail by some more Indians," answered Charlie.

"You know Sam Hall, you say?"

"Yes."

"His men call him Buckskin Sam, I believe."

"Yes, that is the name he is generally known by."

"I have also heard him called Little Yankee."

"So have I," and Charlie bit off a delicious mouthful of steak from a piece he held in his hand and chewed it with a gusto that showed that he was most willing to discuss that just then.

"Well, Hall and his Rangers have been a terror to us," sighed Don Keno.

"And we have not seen the last of them," averred Juan with another sigh.

"You think that the major will hang us?" asked the Don.

"He will hang you."

"And why not Juan?" quickly asked the chief.

"Because I will protect Juan as I promised to," was the quiet response.

"Bravo, boy, put your hand there!" and Juan held forth his hand for a friendly grip.

"Charlie grasped his revolver and extended it, while he said, coolly:

"No, thank you, Juan, for your grip I might not be able to shake off."

"Fasten on to the muzzle of this."

Juan drew back his hand with an oath, while Don Keno laughed heartily.

As soon as their supper was ended Charlie tied their hands behind them once more, and with great care, to be assured of their security.

Then he tied their feet more firmly, and spreading their serapes told them to lie down.

"Where do you sleep, boy?"

"Just here by this tree, Don Keno."

"Why not here with us?"

"I don't like to be crowded; but you make yourselves comfortable and don't mind me for I will water the horses and then take a look around before I go to sleep," and Charlie put out the fire and walked off to where the horses were feeding, while Don Keno remarked to Juan:

"That boy is as cunning as a Comanche; but it will serve him no good this night."

"What do you mean, chief?" eagerly asked Juan.

"Wait and see," was the quiet response of Don Keno, as he lay down to rest as well as he could, bound as he was.

CHAPTER XX.

"TWO AND ONE ARE THREE."

CHARLIE, in his tour of inspection, found the horses enjoying the good grass upon which they were feeding, and leading them to water, he then staked them out in a fresh place, so that they could eat all they wanted.

He was not sure but that a roving band of Indians might happen upon them; but of this he must take the chances.

He was utterly worn out by his loss of rest the past few nights, and felt that he must have sleep.

But he did not like the changed manner of

Don Keno, and felt that he had made some discovery that might help him.

What it was the cunning boy had no means of guessing; but if on his guard he would be forewarned against a surprise.

He had also seen the looks of the Don into the timber, as though expecting some one, and concluded he would make a quiet tour of the thicket before seeking the rest he so much needed.

With his revolver in hand he glided through the motte, but found nothing, and then sought his blanket.

The night was a little chilly and he kindly spread Juan's serape and blanket over the two men as they lay side by side, knowing that they could not use their arms to do so.

Neither of the prisoners spoke a word and Charlie asked:

"Are you asleep?"

No reply.

"Say, Don Keno, you sleep sound."

Still no reply, and Charlie called to Juan with:

"Juan, if the Don attempts to escape to-night I will expect you to wake me up."

But Juan was also sleeping soundly, or pretending to, for he made no reply.

"Well, you two are good, healthy sleepers for men who live the dangerous lives you do," said Charlie, as he fixed himself for his rest, more and more convinced that there was something working wrong against him, for he did not for a moment believe that the two prisoners were asleep.

So dead with slumber was the worn-out boy that his eyes closed as he lay down.

But he knew, or surmised, his danger and forced the heavy lids to open again.

Thus a few minutes passed, and he saw, just as he felt that he must sleep or die, Don Keno raise up to a sitting posture.

This awoke him fully to be on the alert.

But he did not move and some time after began to breathe heavily.

"The boy's asleep at last," whispered Don Keno.

"I saw that he was so worn out that he could not keep his eyes open long," whispered back Juan.

"Well, he will sleep like the dead now, for I know what the slumber of prostration is."

"Now, what is your little game, Don Keno?"

"Wait, and see," and the chief coughed loudly.

But Charlie breathed on as heavily as before and seemed not in the least disturbed.

"Here he comes," at last said the Don.

"Who?"

"Rito."

"The Guide Spy?"

"Yes."

"Is he here?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I saw his face peering out of the mesquites as we rode into the timber, and he looked sick and wretched; but I have heard him several times since in the thicket."

"Where is he?"

"I thought that he was coming, but my eyes fooled me through imagination."

"Is the boy asleep, do you think?"

"Yes, indeed."

"If Rito does not come—"

"He will come."

"Perhaps you imagined that you saw him."

"Bah! I am no fool."

"You just thought that you saw him."

"I was hoping for his appearance; but when we rode into the timber he was not in my mind, and I believed him dead, as that boy reported, you know, that he was caught in his treachery."

"Perhaps he is dead and that was his spirit," said Juan shuddered.

Don Keno also had the superstition of his race, and felt a shiver run over him at this, while he whispered:

"His face did look deathlike."

For a minute both men were silent, and then Juan said:

"I would like to believe that the boy meant to act square toward me, but I had better be on the safe side."

"How?"

"I have a plan to finish him."

"Well?"

"You are the heaviest man!"

"Yes."

"Get up quietly and work your way to within a foot of the boy."

"Yes."

"Then spring into the air and come down with your heels upon the boy's head."

"Juan, you are a jewel."

"I will do it now and not wait longer for Rito, as I half fear that it was his ghost that I saw."

"Your heels will crush his skull."

"They will, indeed, and then we will manage in some way to free our arms."

"One moment, Don."

"Well?"

"You know that I aided in your capture?"

"Can I forget it?"

"That is just what you must pledge yourself to do."

"I will keep a pledge if I give one, Juan."

"And you will give me your promise to forgive me and drop the affair?"

"I will not."

"Then, by the cross, I arouse the boy."

"Hold! I give the pledge," was the quick response.

"Then now do your work."

"Ah! there comes Rito."

"Or his ghost."

"No, that is no ghost."

"Then we are saved."

The next instant there glided up to the spot the form of a man, and in his hand he carried a stout stick.

With this stick it was evident that he intended to strike the sleeping boy.

But suddenly he stopped short, for with a lightning-like movement he was covered with a revolver, while Charlie, still lying down, cried:

"Stop just there, Rito the Guide, or I will kill you."

"Don't fire, for I cry quarter," called out the

man, dropping his stick and raising one hand above his head.

"Up with that other hand, quick!" shouted Charlie.

"I cannot raise it, for you broke my arm when you shot me at the train," was the reply.

"I'd break your head now, only I want you to join my two prisoner pards, for two and one make three," and Charlie laughed as he sprung to his feet and quickly secured his third prisoner.

CHAPTER XXI.

A BOY'S POWER OF PERSUASION.

HAVING securely bound Rito the Guide, Charlie quickly lighted a fire to have a look at him.

He saw that the man's face was full of suffering and that he was in tatters, while he was wholly unarmed.

Glancing at Don Keno, Charlie observed that his face was black as a thunder-cloud, and that he looked pale again at his disappointment.

Juan also seemed to feel deeply the turn affairs had taken, and confident that Charlie had been awake and heard all that was said, he did not expect much mercy from him after his cool proposition to the chief to jump upon him and smash in his skull.

"Buy, I am starving and I want food," said Rito earnestly and in husky tones.

"You shall have it, for here is the remnant of our supper, and I will soon have some hot coffee for you," and Charlie spoke kindly, for he really pitied the man.

As soon as the treacherous guide had in a measure satiated his hunger Charlie asked:

"How is it I find you in this fix?"

"It is better than being dead, isn't it?" was the surly response.

"Tell us about it, Rito," said Don Keno.

"Well, there is little to tell that that boy don't know, for he came to my train and denounced me as a spy, and he gave me this wound, which broke the bone of my arm, while he rode away unhurt."

"The train-boss had a suspicion that all was not right, so sent back on the trail to the fort, and the messenger met Hall and half a dozen of his Rangers, who came on to the camp, and, of course, it was up with me, for they knew who the boy was when they described him, and went on to the Dead Man's Pass, where they found that you and the men had just left there."

"Coming back to the camp of the train they intended to hang me, but I expected some such work, and having fever I just played delirious, and Sam Hall said he would not string up a man out of his head, but told the train-boss to keep me until I got well and that they would pay him a visit where he settled and christen the settlement by hanging me."

"I heard all this and got raving, you may wager high, but at night I slipped off while the emigrant who was watching me was asleep."

"I could not get a weapon of any kind, but that made no difference, for I wanted to save my life."

"Well, I have wandered on prairie and in chaparral ever since, with nothing to eat, and it was a happy moment for me to see you ride into this timber and camp, and I determined to

rescue you from the boy, whose prisoners I saw that you were.

"Well, comrades, I did my best for you, and for myself too, and you see the result."

"Curses on our hard luck," growled Don Keno.

"It is hard luck for you, but good luck for me, I admit," said Charlie, rising.

"What are you going to do, boy?" asked Don Keno.

"I am going to get the horses."

"You don't mean it!"

"I do."

"What, go on to-night?"

"Yes."

"We have had no rest."

"Neither have I."

"The horses won't stand it."

"Oh, yes, they will, for they have had over three hours' rest, with plenty of water and grass, and we won't push them unless we have to."

It was very evident that the three prisoners wanted the youth to remain encamped for the remainder of the night, hoping that some unforeseen circumstance might turn up in their favor.

But Charlie was not willing to risk longer delay, and, tired as he was he was determined to push on.

He soon got the horses saddled and bridled, and ordered the prisoners to be ready to mount.

"I suppose I walk?" snarled Rito.

"Oh, no; I will let you ride behind me for awhile, and then have you take turnabout with the others, so that the horses will have an equal share of you."

The men now stood in line, bound hand and foot, but they looked ugly.

They were cut deep to the heart that they should be the prisoners of a mere boy.

But there they were, and there was no help for it.

Still they felt aggressive in the worst degree.

"Come, mount, Don Keno," said Charlie.

"No, boy, I have had enough of this," was the angry reply.

"You cannot have it otherwise."

"I will, though."

"How?"

"Men, lay down and he cannot move us, that is certain."

The three men dropped to the ground.

"Will you get up, Don Keno?" asked Charlie quietly.

"I will not."

"I hate to force you to."

"You cannot force me, boy."

Charlie simply drew his knife and put the point against the Don's back.

"Will you obey?"

"No, and you dare not kill me, for you would give your soul to take me alive to the Rangers."

"I do not intend to kill you."

"What, then?"

"I will see just how much sticking you can stand."

Don Keno winced, but made no reply.

"Will you go?"

"No."

Charlie suddenly seized the man's ear in a strong grip, and laying the knife-edge upon it, said sternly:

"Now, do as I tell you, or off comes your ear."

Don Keno was a handsome man, and one filled with vanity of his personal appearance.

He could not suffer the loss of an ear, and he saw that the boy was in earnest.

So he said sullenly:

"Curse you, boy, I won't have you disfigure me, so help me to rise and mount."

Charlie did so, and the chief was bound securely upon his horse.

"Now, Juan, do you intend to mind, or would you rather lose your ear?"

"I will do as you say."

"Then here is your horse."

Juan then was aided into his saddle, and being bound, Charlie turned to Rito:

"Now, what will you do?"

"You'll not back me down as you did them, if one is my chief," was the savage reply.

"You do not mind then the loss of an ear?"

"Cut them both off if you like."

"No, I'll try another plan."

All looked to see what that other plan was.

Charlie soon showed them, for he took one-half of the lariat that bound the three horses together, and fastened it around the neck of the treacherous guide.

Then he made a loop in it, and passed it over the horn of his saddle.

Going to the man he said:

"I do not wish to harm you, for your arm is broken, and I will give you much pain; but if you do not let me aid you to mount that horse, I will knock you down and drag you if I kill you."

Rito shook his head viciously, and quick into his face went the small, hard fist of Charley Bigelow, felling the strong man to the ground.

Then leaping into the saddle he moved the horses forward; the lariat tightened, and the man would have been dragged along on the ground by his neck had he not shouted out:

"I yield! For God's sake do not choke me to death!"

Charley reined up instantly, and leaping to the ground, aided the man to his feet, and then assisted him to mount behind his saddle.

Then he sprung nimbly into the saddle, and the three horses were headed out upon the prairie.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BOY RANGER.

OFTEN during that night-ride across the prairie with his three outlaw captives, Charlie Bigelow found himself awaking with a start from a sound nap, for he was utterly worn out.

In silence the prisoners rode along, each busy with his own thoughts, and to relieve the horses of their double weight, Charley quite often sprung up behind Don Keno and Juan, this being easier than for him to dismount and mount Rito on another animal.

Now and then the captives would beg for a halt, but Charlie was firm, and flatly told them that there was no halting until he reached the

Texas Charlie, the Boy Ranger.

Ranger camp for he had had trouble enough with them.

"I reckon I'll be gray when I see the Rangers," he said, half in earnest, and mentally he wished he had not undertaken so big a task.

But he was nervous from loss of rest and excitement, and it would have been a bad break for any of his three captives to attempt to trifle with him then, for he would have ended the matter by saving the hangman trouble.

After a night that seemed interminable to the brave youth, the dawn broke and soon after the sun rose.

During the night he had been traveling from his knowledge of the lay of the country, and not having passed any familiar landmarks, was not certain just where he was, or how far off his right course he had strayed.

But with daylight his eyes fell upon a stream he well knew, and soon after, far in the distance, he spied some low hills clad with trees, and then the white walls of a hacienda.

"What ranch is that, boy?"

The question came from Don Keno.

"Major Sam Hall's."

The three prisoners instinctively turned a shade whiter, and remained silent.

"I shall soon introduce you to him," continued Charlie; but seeing the distressed faces of the men he forbore from tantalizing them, for his heart was too noble to enjoy the sufferings of others, be they ever so simple and undeserving of pity.

It was not very long before a column of blue smoke was seen curling above the tree-tops up on the left of the trail, and Charlie said:

"There is the Rangers' camp, Don Keno, that you wished me to lead you to."

"Yes, but I did not expect to come this way."

"Nor did I expect that you would do so; but we shall arrive in time for breakfast."

"There must be a number of the Rangers in camp, for there are nearly a dozen different columns of smoke which denote as many campfires," said Juan.

"Yes, the Rangers are out in force for some reason," answered Charlie.

"How many has Buckskin Sam under his command?" asked Don Keno.

"How many do you think?"

"I have heard them estimated from forty to a hundred and fifty."

Charlie laughed, and said:

"Yes, in a fight they are supposed to number five times what they really are; but there are always half a score in camp, and the whole squadron take turns at staying there as messengers to collect the band, if needed in haste."

"But Major Sam, as the boys call him, has just sixty men under him; but see, we are discovered."

As Charlie spoke a horseman came dashing out of the timber directly toward the advancing party, and throwing his hat in the air as Charlie sprung to the ground from behind Don Keno, called him by name, and shouted out:

"Ho, pard! here is Wild Charlie now."

A yell came from the throats of half a hundred men in the timber, and when Charlie rode

into the camp, leading the three horses bearing the prisoners, all eyes were upon him, and a dozen voices called out:

"Bravo, Wild Charlie!"

"Well, Charlie, we were just going to look you up," said a young man coming forward and grasping his hand.

"Look me up, Major Hall?"

"Yes, for I learned of your warning the train and the way you were served, and supposed you had been captured by the Marauders, so I called in the Rangers and we were going to pay them a call in your behalf."

"But who have you there?"

"Are you Major Sam Hall of the Texas Rangers?" asked Don Keno fixing his gaze upon the young Ranger officer.

"I am, sir."

"You are surely not the man that has won the names of Buckskin Sam and Little Yankee?" and Don Keno saw before him a man of small, wiry form, piercing black eyes, a clean cut, fearless, resolute face, and long waving hair, black as night, that fell far below his shoulders.

He was dressed in buckskin leggings stuck in cavalry boots, on the heels of which were massive gold spurs, and his hunting shirt of buckskin was richly embroidered with beads.

His sombrero was of black felt turned up in front and the flap pinned with a gold star, while the crown was encircled by a gold chain for a cord, one end having a toy revolver as an ornament, and the other a miniature bowie-knife.

The Ranger was strangely youthful in appearance for one who had made himself known over the southwest as a desperate Indian-fighter, implacable foe to outlaws and Mexicans, and a trailer that had no superior in the Lone Star State.

About his waist was a belt of arms, a pair of revolvers and bowie of the finest workmanship, and his rank was denoted only by a crimson scarf and the gold star upon his hat, his men all wearing silver stars and cords.

Having received an answer in the affirmative that the man before him was none other than Major Sam Hall, Don Keno said in a distinct voice:

"Then, Major Hall, permit me to introduce myself as Don Keno, captain of the Mexican Marauders, and the captive, with two others of my band, of that daring boy."

Buckskin Sam had never met Don Keno face to face before, and, in fact, there were not three of the Rangers that had done so; but at this confession a wild yell broke from their lips, and pressing forward they called out:

"Charlie, tell us how it happened?"

"Awful easy it seems to me now I am with you all, but last night it looked different I can tell you," answered Charlie with a smile and blush.

"You, then, Charlie, are the captor of Don Keno and his two men?"

"Yes, Major Hall."

"Let me congratulate you, and tell you that you have done a deed that my Rangers and myself have in vain tried to do the past year."

"But tell us how it was, and then the boys

will aid these gentlemen to dismount and we will all have some breakfast, for you and your captives certainly look used up."

"We are, and I feel as though I could sleep a week."

"First tell us your story, Charlie."

In a few words Charlie told all that had happened, from the chase of himself and Old Hickory by the Indians to his second escape from the Marauders and the capture of Juan, Don Keno and Rita.

His words were greeted with shouts of applause and words of admiration, as he told his straightforward story, and at its conclusion Buckskin Sam grasped his hand and said earnestly:

"Charlie, you are indeed a worthy son of the Lone Star State, and I baptize you Texas Charlie."

"Three cheers for Texas Charlie, pard," shouted a voice, and the roar of voices that broke forth in the cheer was deafening.

"And now, Texas Charlie, as you have proven yourself a man, I hereby name you the Boy Ranger of this band."

"Three cheers for the Boy Ranger," cried one, and again the woods echoed with the shouts of the gallant Rangers, and that moment was the proudest of Charlie Bigelow's life, for to become one of that daring band had been the dream of his earliest boyhood.

CHAPTER XXIII.

RANGER JUSTICE.

WHEN the excitement over his story, and his initiation into the band of Texas Rangers had in a manner subsided, Charlie called Major Hall to one side and told him, what he had not publicly made known, who it was that had aided him to escape from the Marauders, and the sad career she led as the wife of the Mexican bandit-chief.

"Never mind, Charlie, we will make a young widow of her before sunset," said Buckskin Sam.

"Now, Major Hall," continued Charlie, "I told you how I captured Don Keno only through the aid of Juan, and I pledged him his life, and that he should go free."

"It is bad to turn such a wretch as he is loose, Charlie."

"True, sir; but we would not have had the worse wretch, Don Keno, but for him, and I promised him."

"And you wish to keep that promise?"

"I must do it, sir."

"Well, you shall keep your word to him; but I will give him just two days to get out of Texas, and it will be death to him if he is caught again on this side of the Rio Grande."

"I have a better plan, sir."

"Name it."

"You forget the Marauders."

"What of them?"

"We have their chief, and I think I could lead you to their stronghold; but Juan certainly can, and you could then let him go free, for he would be upon his own soil."

"A splendid idea, Charlie, and I will let you maneuver this thing, as you have begun so well, so what do you propose?"

"You have fifty men?"

"Fifty-three in camp—no, I beg your pardon, fifty-four with you."

"And the Marauders number just forty-one with the three who are here."

"Well, that leaves thirty-eight, and we can wipe them out from the face of the earth."

"We must cross the river, sir, early in the night, so as to attack the stronghold and get back with their stolen booty and cattle before daylight."

"Charlie, you are a born soldier, and all shall be as you say; but what about the lady?"

"I will seek her, sir, before the fight opens, for I know her tepee well, and will take her to a place of safety with her servant, a peon woman."

"Well, we will start this afternoon, so as to reach the Rio Grande to-morrow night at dark."

"Now let us see about breakfast, which Black Dan has ready for us, and then we will see what is to be done with the prisoners, though I pretty well know what their fate will be beforehand."

The negro servant of Major Hall now had breakfast ready, and for awhile it was a busy scene at the different camp-fires, the prisoners eating with the major, Charlie and the rest of the commander's mess.

But neither of the three outlaws had much appetite, for their lives hung in a balance, with death on the side of justice, and they were too nervous to eat, though Don Keno was calm and stern.

After the meal was over the Rangers began to assemble about their major's camp-fire, and it looked as though they knew what would be the first duty to perform.

"Comrades," said Buckskin Sam, in his clear tenor-like voice:

"You see here three prisoners, brought into our camp by this brave boy by my side."

"This man, Don Keno, is the acknowledged chief of the Mexican Marauders, and these other two are men of his band, one of them being the traitor who was leading an emigrant train to death some days ago, and would have done so, but for Texas Charlie, our Boy Ranger."

"What the Mexican Marauders have done, we all know, for they have shown themselves merciless murderers, robbers, and they have shot down many of our gallant band who have endeavored to punish them."

"Is there a dissenting voice that these men do not deserve death?"

A deathlike silence followed the question.

"Your silence is answer sufficient, and I here condemn Don Keno and his two followers to death, for such is the justice of the Texas Rangers."

A wild shout of approval greeted these words, while Texas Charlie turned to his commander with anxious face, and Juan became as livid as did Don Keno and Rito the Guide.

CHAPTER XXIV.

QUICK WORK.

CHARLIE'S look of anxiety toward his chief was at hearing him pass sentence upon all three

of the prisoners, after having promised him that he would spare Juan, to make his pledge good to the wretched villain.

"You will not hang Juan, sir," he pleaded.

"Men," continued the major: "I have condemned three men to death, but now I claim the prerogative to pardon one of them, offering him his life, while the other two men have but ten minutes to live."

"I claim this pardon to fulfill a pledge made by Texas Charlie to one of them, for rendering him good service."

"The Virgin bless you forever, boy," cried Juan in a broken voice, while tears of joy came into his eyes at his escape.

"This man," Major Hall went on, "stands there, and it is through his aid that our young comrade was able to bring to us a captive that merciless murderer Don Keno."

"Hence it is that I offer him full pardon when he has done for the Rangers one service."

"I will do all in my power, Senor Major," cried Juan earnestly.

"Then, sir, you will lead us by night to the stronghold of your band, that we may wipe it out utterly from the face of the earth, and from that moment you are free to go your way; but I warn you, never again do you touch foot on Texas soil."

"I will guide you to the stronghold gladly, senor, and once again I cross the Rio Grande, never will I come to your land, I swear it."

"Base traitor, you are more deserving of death than I with all my crimes on my head," hissed Don Keno savagely.

"Come, Don Keno, you and that comrade of yours prepare to die, and Charlie, unbind that man and set him free."

Charlie gladly released Juan of his bonds, and the grateful wretch seized his hand and kissed it, much to the young Ranger's disgust, for he hated to see a man so afraid to die as to become a groveling coward.

As for Don Keno and Rito they received their sentence with stolidity, nor did they flinch when they saw the Texans preparing the lariats to hang them.

"Major Hall!" suddenly called out Don Keno.

"Well, sir?"

"You are a brave man, I know, and you are said to have a noble heart, and I beg of you a favor."

"Well?"

"I do not flinch from death, but I do from hanging like a dog."

"Let your men shoot me, and the last words upon my lips will be a prayer for you."

Sam Hall's lip quivered, for he was touched by this appeal, and he called out:

"Throw aside those lariats, men, and six of you step off ten paces before these men, for what they may in villainy, they have pluck, and shall die like brave men at least."

"God bless you, Major Hall," said Don Keno, while Rito uttered the words fervently:

"Senor, I thank you, and may the Virgin save you in your dying hour."

Sam Hall had a big heart, and his voice quivered as he gave the order:

"Men, fire at their hearts."

"Are you ready?"

The three Rangers standing before each outlaw answered in chorus:

"Ready, sir."

"Fire!"

The six revolvers flashed together, and Don Keno and Rito the Guide dropped dead in their tracks; while Juan said to Texas Charlie, by whose side he stood:

"You Rangers make quick work of an execution, senor."

"Now you shall die, you Mexican dog, for I do not pardon you!" shouted a loud voice, and a man was leveling a revolver at Juan when, with the quickness of a flash, Texas Charlie drew a weapon and fired, and the Ranger uttered a cry of pain as the pistol dropped from his shattered hand.

"Well done, Charlie! Boone, you deserved that for daring to go against my orders!" cried Major Hall, springing toward the man through whose hand the bullet had cut its way.

The wounded man glanced at his hand an instant, marked the course of the bullet, and said coolly:

"I know I did, major, and I am sorry for it; but there are no bones broken; it is only a flesh wound, and I offer the hand to Charlie in token of forgiveness, for he did right to protect the outlaw."

Charlie grasped the blood-stained hand, and the wounded man did not flinch, but said coolly:

"Now, Doc, just dress it up like a doll baby, and I'll be ready for the trail," and he turned to a young ranchero who was the surgeon of the Ranger band, and half an hour after he rode off on the trail with his comrades, at whose head was Sam Hall, Texas Charlie and Juan, the latter exceedingly nervous, for he knew that he was among a wild lot of men who eyed him with no friendly glance.

CHAPTER XXV.

A LOST ONE FOUND.

AT a pace that brought them to the banks of the Rio Grande just at the time they wished, the Rangers held their way, and then Juan became the guide.

By his side rode Texas Charlie, and the youth had hinted that any sly work to thwart them would be visited with sudden retribution upon him.

"I will act square, senor, as you did with me; but there is one thing I ask of you."

"What is it, Juan?"

"Let me first see the Senora Rita."

"No."

"I wish to tell her that the Don is dead, and beg her to fly with me, that I may be her protector, for with her influence I feel I could be a different man."

"I think it would be a good idea, Juan, for you to become a different man; but I intend to first see the senora myself and ask her to place herself under the protection of Major Hall."

"She will not do it."

"She shall have the chance to refuse."

"But now here is the ridge behind the camp as I remember it?"

"Yes, senor."

"And there are no guards kept here?"

"No, senor."

"Then remain here with the major," and after a few words with Buckskin Sam Charlie dismounted and went on foot over the ridge of the hill.

He reached a point where he discovered the large tepee of the chief, and creeping forward he gained a position from whence he could see within.

There was a light there, and Senora Rita was seated at a table her head buried upon her hands while the peon woman lay on a chaparral tiger-skin at her feet.

"Senora Rita!"

At her name she started, and Charlie continued huskily:

"I am the boy you rescued."

"Put out your light and let me come into the epee."

The woman instantly obeyed and the next moment Charlie glided into the tepee.

"Oh, why have you come here?" cried the woman grasping his hand.

"To tell you that which will give you joy to know."

"Holy Virgin, Don Keno is dead," she gasped.

"Yes."

"You killed him?"

"I captured him and the Rangers shot him."

"Oh, young senor, you have saved me from dyeing my hands in that man's blood, and I bless you for it, for he was my husband."

"I loved him, and married him, supposing him to be an honorable man, but found him what you know him to be."

"Come, Nuna, the chief is dead and we will return to our old home."

The peon woman sprung to her feet with a half cry of joy; but Charlie checked her and said:

"Senora Rita, you and the woman come with me."

"Whither?"

"Out of danger."

"Ha! then you are not alone!"

"No, Senora."

"The Texas Rangers are—"

"Waiting my return to attack this camp."

"Then we will go at once," and five minutes after they were hiding upon the ridge, while the Rangers were moving down the ridge trail into the camp.

"Now, Juan, you must go, and never let us see you again," said Charlie.

"I never will, senor; adios," answered the Mexican, and he rode off along the ridge, just as the Rangers went tearing through the outlaw camp.

With wild war-cries and rattling revolvers they swept all before them, and in ten minutes a dozen wounded, scared, wretches were all that

remained of Don Keno's band of Mexican Marauders.

"Now I will return for the senora," said Charlie, and he rode to the spot where he had left her to meet suddenly, dashing along the ridge, a horseman bearing in his arms a woman.

"It is the senora, and Juan is bearing her off."

"Halt, Juan!" shouted Charlie.

But the man held on his way, and Charlie drove his spurs deep and was the next instant by his side."

"Save me, senor!" cried Senora Rita.

"Take that, boy!" yelled Juan, and he thrust his revolver forward.

But it snapped, while Charlie's weapon sent a bullet through his brain.

"I am not hurt," cried Senora Rita, springing to her feet from the ground where she had fallen with the Mexican, and she added:

"You have returned the service I rendered you, senor."

Charlie led the unfortunate lady back to the camp, and Major Hall was most kind to her, and offered her his protection; but she declined it politely, and mounting their horses, she and the peon woman rode off upon their way, happy in being free from the Marauders power.

It was but short work for the Rangers to pack the outlaws' horses down with booty, and driving the herds of ponies and cattle before them to start on the back trail for Texas, crossing the river while it was yet dark, and half-wild with their grand victory.

Once on the Texan shore Charlie slipped off by himself and rode off the trail a mile to the hacienda of Don Henry.

His interview with that person was very short, but it was long enough to convince the renegade Texan that his safety lay in crossing the river to Mexican soil, and he lost no time in getting together his household goods, family and servants, and emigrating into a land more congenial to his wishes and mode of life.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CONCLUSION.

THE part that Texas Charlie played as a youth, in wiping out the outlaw band of Don Keno made him a hero, and his name became famous.

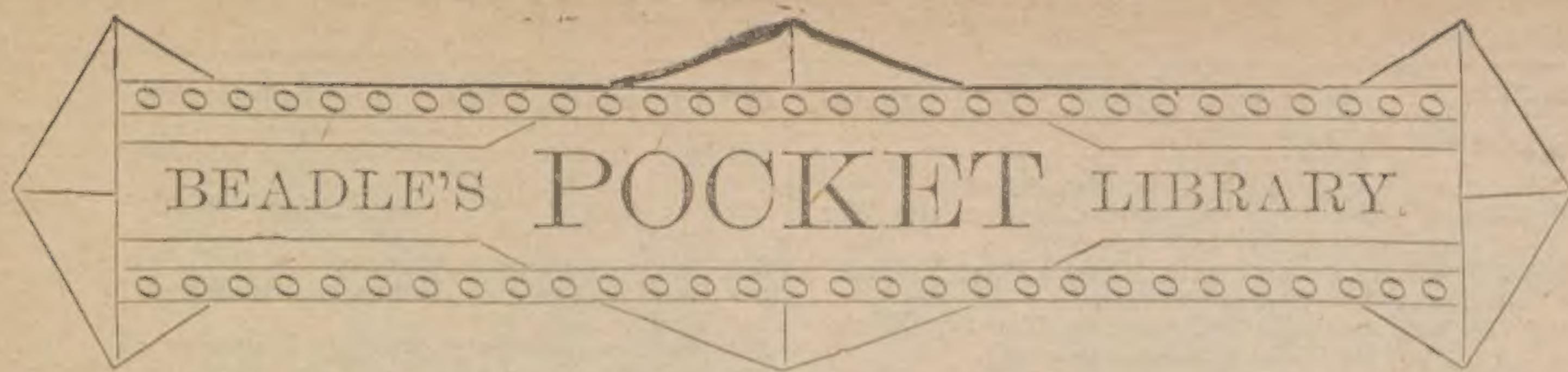
But, not content to rest upon his laurels won, he sought new triumphs, and became noted as a Ranger, Indian fighter, scout and guide, while he served with great distinction in several of the Indian wars under the lamented Custer, the gallant Crook, and other generals of border fame, while few frontiersmen are to-day more respected for their genuine worth than is the noble-hearted, whole-souled man whose dash and daring have won him the title of Wild Texas Charlie.

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